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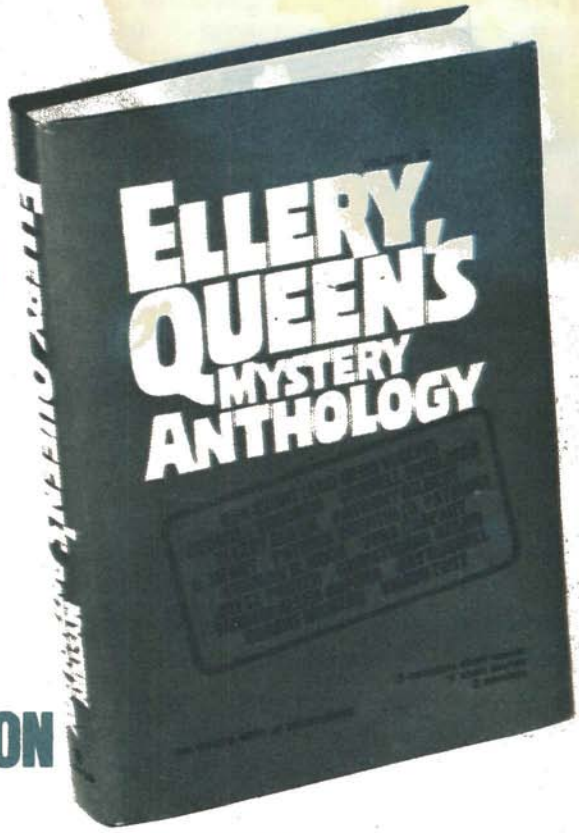

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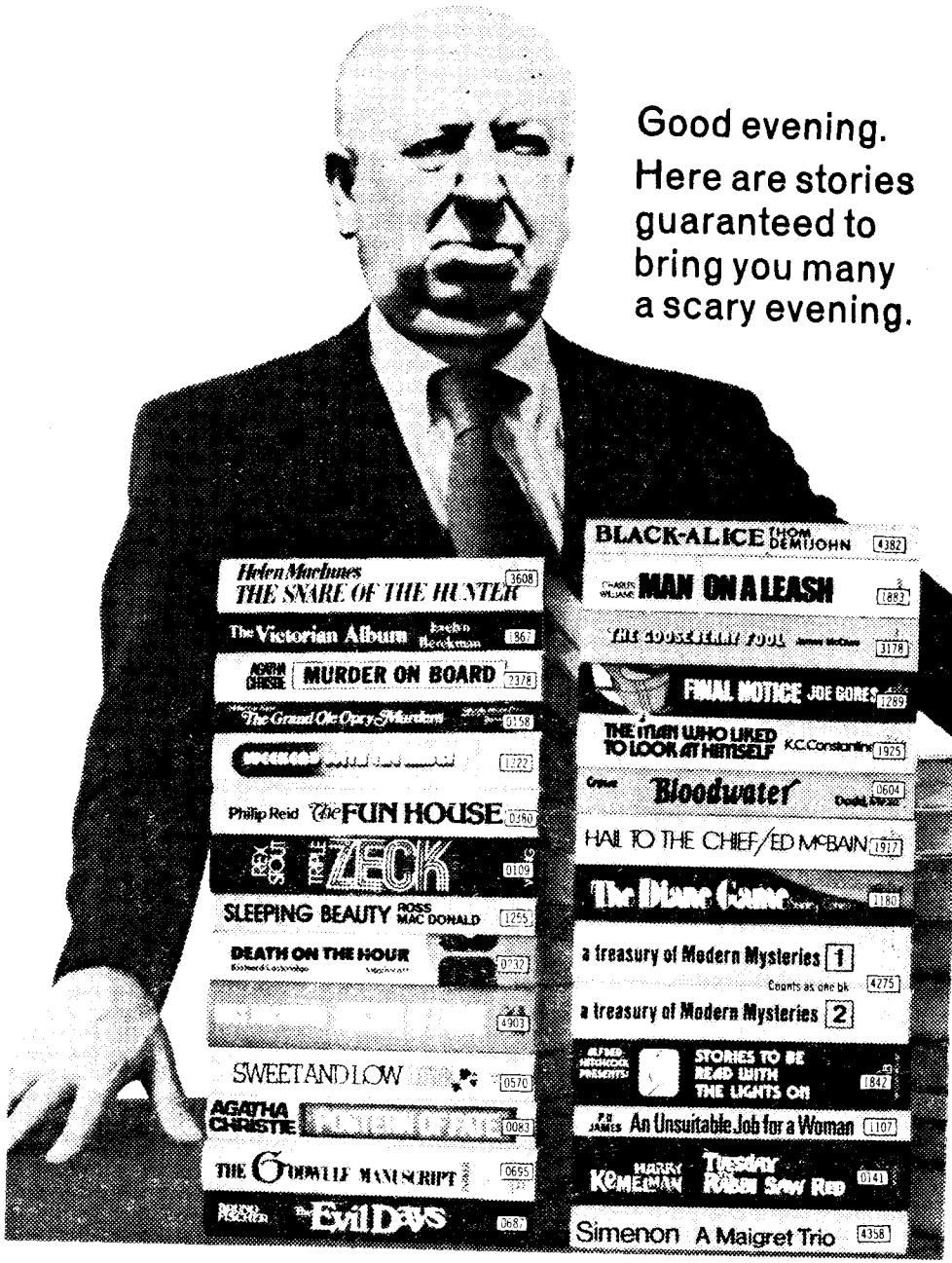
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"Q"

a NERO WOLFE short novel by REX STOUT

complete in this issue

When you read a detective-mystery, what is calculated to rivet you to your chair, making you forget eating, drinking, sleeping, even watching TV? Well, one thing is the unexpected—when what happens next isn't what you expect to happen, when the unfolding of events is one surprise after another.

In this Nero Wolfe short novel, complete in this issue, it is the unexpected that keeps the pot boiling. As Archie Goodwin, Wolfe's legman and assistant, says: at first there were too many answers, then there were no answers . . . but ultimately, of course, we know there has to be one answer, and one answer only . . .

THE GUN PUZZLE

by REX STOUT

The red leather chair was four feet away from the end of Nero Wolfe's desk, so when she got the gun from her handbag she had to get up and take a step to put it on the desk. Then she returned to the chair, closed the bag, and told Wolfe, "That's the gun I'm not going to shoot my husband with."

Sitting facing her with my back to my desk, which was at right angles to Wolfe's, I raised my brows. I hadn't expected her to put on an act. When she had phoned the previous afternoon to ask for an

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originally titled "Death of a Demon."

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appointment she had of course sounded a little jumpy, as most people do when they call the office of a private detective, but she had been quite matter-of-fact in giving the details.

Her name was Lucy Hazen, Mrs. Barry Hazen. She gave her address, on East 37th Street between Park and Lexington. All she wanted was thirty minutes with Nero Wolfe, to tell him something confidential. She didn't want him to do anything, not even give her advice; she merely wanted to tell him something; and she would pay $100 for the half hour. She could and would pay more if she had to, but she hoped the hundred would be enough.

In November or December, when Wolfe's income has reached a point where out of a hundred received he can keep only twenty bucks, he will make an appointment only for someone or something very special; but this was January, no big fee was in prospect, and even a measly C would help in the upkeep of his old brownstone on West 35th Street, including staff, particularly since he wouldn't have to work for it. So it was set for 11:30 the following morning, Tuesday.

When the doorbell rang at 11:30 on the dot and I went to let her in, she gave me a smile and said, "Thank you for getting him to see me." Handshakes can be faked and usually are, but smiles can't. It isn't often that a man gets a natural, friendly, straightforward smile from a young woman who has never seen him before, with no come-on, no catch, and no dare, and the least he can do is return it if he has that kind in stock.

As I took her to the office and helped her off with her coat, which was mink, I was thinking that you never know, even the good-looking wife of a well-known public-relations operator like Barry Hazen could have her feelings on straight. I was pleased to meet her.

So I was disappointed when she put on an act. It is not natural for a woman to open a conversation with a stranger by taking a revolver from her bag and saying that's the gun she isn't going to shoot her husband with. I must have been wrong about the smile, and since I don't like to be wrong I was no longer pleased to meet her. I raised my brows and tightened my lips.

Wolfe, in his oversized chair behind his desk, darted a glance at the gun, returned his eyes to her, and grunted. "I am not impressed," he said, "by histrionics."

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"Oh," she said, "I'm not trying to impress you. I'm only telling you. That's what I came for, just to tell you. I thought it would be more—more definite, I guess—if I brought the gun and showed it to you."

"Very well, you have done so." Wolfe was frowning. "I understand that you intend to ask me for no service or advice; you wish only to tell me something in confidence. I should remind you that I am not a lawyer or a priest; a communication from you to me will not be privileged. If you tell me about a crime I can't engage not to disclose it. I mean a serious crime, not some petty offense such as carrying a deadly weapon for which you have no permit."

"I hadn't thought of that, carrying a weapon." She dismissed it with a little gesture. "That's all right. There hasn't been any crime and there isn't going to be, that's just the point. That's what I came to tell you, that I'm not going to shoot my husband."

Wolfe's eyes were narrowed at her. He is convinced that all women are dotty or devious, or both, and here was more evidence to support it. "Just that?" he demanded. "You wanted half an hour."

She nodded. She set her teeth on her lip, nice white teeth, and in a moment released it. "Because I thought it would be better if I told you something about. . .why. If you will regard it as confidential."

"With the reservation I have made."

"Of course. You know who my husband is? Barry Hazen, Public Relations?"

"Mr. Goodwin has informed me."

"We were married two years ago. I was the secretary of a client of his, Jules Khoury, the inventor. My father, Titus Postel, was also an inventor, and he was associated with Mr. Khoury until his death five years ago. That's where I met Barry, at Mr. Khoury's office. I thought I really was in love with him. I have tried and tried to decide what was the real reason I married him, I mean the *real* one, whether it was only because I wanted to have—"

She stopped and put her teeth on her lip. She shook her head, with energy, as if to chase a fly. "There you are," she said. "I mean there I am. You don't need to know all that. I'm just blubbering, fishing for pity. You don't even need to know why I want to kill him."

Wolfe muttered, "It's your half hour, madam."

"I don't hate him." She shook her head again. "I think I

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despise him—I know I do—and he won't let me get a divorce. I tried to leave him, I did leave him, but he made such a— There I go again! I don't *need* to tell you all that!"

"As you please."

"It's not as I please, Mr. Wolfe, it's as I must!"

"As you must, then."

"This is what I *must* tell you. He has a gun in a drawer in his bedroom. That's it there on your desk. We have separate bedrooms. You know how there can be something in your mind but you don't know it's there until all of a sudden there it is?"

"Certainly. The subconscious is not a grave; it's a cistern."

"But we don't know what's in it. I didn't. One day a month ago—it was the day after Christmas—I went to his bedroom and took the gun from the drawer and looked to see if it was loaded, and it was, and all of a sudden I was thinking how easy it would be to shoot him while he was in bed asleep. I said to myself, 'You idiot, you absolute idiot,' and put the gun back, and I didn't go near that drawer again. But the thought came back, it kept coming, mostly when I was trying to go to sleep, and it got worse. It got worse this way, it wasn't just going in when he was asleep and getting the gun and shooting him, it was planning how to do it so I wouldn't get caught.

"I knew it was idiotic, but I couldn't stop. I could *not!* And one night, just two nights ago, Sunday night, I got out of bed trembling all over and went to the shower and turned on the cold water and stood under it. I had found a plan that would work. I don't have to tell you what the plan was."

"As you please. As you must."

"It doesn't matter. I went back to bed, but I didn't sleep. I wasn't afraid I might do something in my sleep, I was afraid of what my mind might do. I had found out that I couldn't manage my mind. So yesterday afternoon I decided I would fix it so my mind would have to quit. I would tell someone all about it and then the plan wouldn't work, and no plan would work so I wouldn't get caught.

"Telling a friend wouldn't do, not a real friend, because that would leave a loophole. Of course I couldn't tell the police. I have no pastor because I don't go to church. Then I thought of you, and I phoned for an appointment, and here I am. That's all, except this: I want you to promise that if my husband is shot and killed you

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will tell the police about my coming here and what I said."

Wolfe grunted.

She unlocked her fingers, straightened her shoulders, and took a long deep breath—in with her mouth closed and out with it open. "There!" she said. "That's it."

Wolfe was regarding her. "I engaged only to listen," he said, "but I must offer a comment. Your stratagem should be effective as a self-deterrent, but what if someone else shoots him? And I report this conversation to the police? You'll be in a pickle."

"Not if I didn't do it."

"Pfui. Of course you will, unless the culprit is soon exposed."

"If I didn't do it I wouldn't care." She extended a hand, palm up. "Mr. Wolfe. After I decided to tell you and made the appointment, I had the first good night's sleep I have had for a month. No one is going to shoot him. I want you to promise to tell the police, so *I* can't."

"I advise you not to insist on a promise."

"I must! I must *now!*"

"Very well." His shoulders went up a quarter of an inch and down again.

"You promise?"

"Yes."

She opened her bag, a large tan leather one, and took out a checkfold and a pen. "I would rather make it a check than cash," she said, "so it will be on record. Is a check all right?"

"Certainly."

"I mentioned a hundred dollars to Mr. Goodwin. Will that be enough?"

He said yes, and she wrote, resting the check on the side of the bag. To save her the trouble of getting up to hand it over I went and took it, but when she had closed the bag she arose anyway, and was turning to get her coat from the back of the chair when Wolfe spoke.

"Ten minutes of your half hour is left, Mrs. Hazen, if you have any use for it."

"No, thank you. I just realized that wasn't exactly the truth, what I told Mr. Goodwin, that I only wanted to tell you something. I wanted you to promise something too. I *do* thank you and I won't take—oh! You say I have ten minutes?" She glanced at her wrist. She turned to me. "I would love to see the orchids—just a quick look. If you would, Mr. Goodwin?"

"It will be a pleasure," I said, and meant it, but Wolfe was pushing back his chair. "Mr. Goodwin doesn't owe you the ten minutes, I do," he said. "Come with me. You won't need your coat."

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He headed for the door. She gave me a glance with a suggestion of a smile, and followed him out. The sound came from the hall of the elevator door opening and closing.

I had no kick coming. The ten thousand orchids in the three plant rooms up on the roof of the old brownstone were his, not mine. He did like to show them off—so would you if they were yours—but that wasn't why he had intervened. He had some letters to dictate, and he thought that if I took her up to look at the orchids there was no telling when we would come back down. Years ago he decided, on insufficient evidence, that I forget about time when I am with an attractive young woman, and once he has decided something that settles it.

The phone rang. I got it at my desk and told it, "Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking." It was a man over in Jersey who makes sausage to Wolfe's specifications, wanting to know if we were ready for a shipment, and I switched it to Fritz in the kitchen. Thinking there was no better way for a licensed detective to fill idle time than by snooping, I picked up the mink coat for an inspection. When I saw that the label said Bergmann I decided that inspection would be superfluous and put it back on the chair.

I picked up the gun that she wasn't going to shoot her husband with. It was a Drexel .32, nice and clean, and the cylinder was full of cartridges, nothing for a lady with no permit to be toting around town. I inspected her check, East Side Bank and Trust Company, signed Lucy Hazen, and went and put it in the safe.

After glancing at my wrist watch, I turned on the radio for the noon news, and stood and stretched while I listened to it. Algeria was boiling. A building contractor on Staten Island denied that he had had favors from a politician. Fidel Castro was telling the Cuban people that the people who ran the United States government were a bunch of bums (my translation). Then:

"The body of a man named Barry Hazen was found this morning in an alley between two buildings on Norton Street in the lower West Side of Manhattan. He had been shot in the back and had been dead for some hours. No further details are available at present. Mr. Hazen was a well-known public-relations counselor. The Democratic leaders in Congress have apparently decided to center their fire—"

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I turned it off.

I went and picked up the gun and smelled it, the barrel tip and the sides. That was silly but natural. When you would like to know if a gun has been fired recently you smell it automatically, but it doesn't mean a thing unless it has just been fired, say within thirty minutes, and there has been no opportunity to clean it.

I stood with it in my hand, looking at it, and then put it in a drawer of my desk. Her bag was there on the red leather chair, and I opened it and removed the contents. There were all the items you would expect a woman who wore Bergmann mink to have with her, but nothing more. I got the gun from the drawer, removed the cartridges, and examined them with a glass, to see if one of them, or maybe two, was brighter and newer than the others. They all looked alike.

As I was returning the gun to the drawer the sound came from the elevator descending, its thud at the bottom, and the door opening. They entered, Mrs. Hazen in front, and she crossed to the red leather chair, picked up her bag, turned to Wolfe's desk, and then turned to me.

"Where's the gun?" she asked. "I'm taking it."

"There has been a development, Mrs. Hazen." I was facing her at arm's length. "I turned on the radio for the news, and he said that—I'll repeat it *verbatim*. He said, 'The body of a man named Barry Hazen was found this morning in an alley between two buildings on Norton Street in lower Manhattan. He had been shot in the back and had been dead for some hours. No further details are available at present. Mr. Hazen was a public-relations counselor.' That's what he said."

She was gawking at me. "You're m-m-m-m—" She started over. "You're making it up."

"No. That's what he said. Your husband has been shot dead."

The bag slipped from her hand to the floor and her face went white and stiff. I had seen people turn pale before, but I had never seen blood leave skin so thoroughly and so fast. She backed up an unsteady step, and I took her arm and eased her into the chair. Wolfe, who had stopped in the center of the room, snapped at me, "Get *something*. Brandy."

I moved, but she said, "Not for me. He said that?"

"Yes."

"He's dead. He's *dead?*"

"Yes."

She rammed her fists against

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her temples and pounded them. Wolfe said, "I'll be in the kitchen," and turned to go. To him a woman overwhelmed, no matter by what, is merely a woman having a fit, and it's too much for him. But I said, "Hold it, she'll be all right in a minute," and he came and looked down at her, let out a growl, went to his chair, and sat.

"I want to phone somebody," she said. "I have to *know*. Who can I phone?" Her fists were in her lap.

"A shot of brandy or whiskey wouldn't hurt," I told her.

"I don't want anything. Who can I phone?"

"Nobody." Wolfe was curt. "Not just now."

Her head jerked to him. "Why not?"

"Because we must first consider whether *I* should phone—phone the police to report what you have told me. I promised to. Archie. Where's the gun?"

"In my desk drawer."

"Has it been fired recently?"

"No telling. If so it's been cleaned. It's fully loaded and the cartridges all look alike."

"Did she shoot him?"

That was routine; he merely wanted my opinion as a qualified expert on women. His over-all estimate of me and my relations with females is full of contradictions, but that doesn't bother him. "For a quick guess," I said, "no. To make it final I would need facts."

"So would I. Did you shoot your husband, Mrs. Hazen?"

She shook her head.

"I prefer to hear it if you can speak. Did you shoot him?"

"No." She had to push it out.

"Since my promise was to you, you may of course release me from it. Do you wish me to phone the police?"

"Not now." The blood was beginning to creep back into her skin. "You don't have to now. You won't ever have to. He's dead, and I didn't kill him." She rose to her feet, not very steady, but not staggering. "That's all over now."

"Sit down." It was a command. "It's not so simple. When the police ask you where you were this morning from eleven o'clock on what will you say? Confound it, quit propping yourself on my desk and sit down! That's better. What will you say?"

"Why. . ." She was on the edge of the chair. "Will they ask me that?"

"Certainly. Unless they already have the murderer and the evidence beyond all question, and that's too much to hope for. You will have to

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account for every minute since you last saw your husband. Did you come here in a cab?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll say so. You'll have to. And when they ask why you came to see me what will you say?"

She shook her head. She looked at me and back at him. "Oh," she said. "You'll have to tell me what to say."

He nodded. "I expected that." His head turned. "Archie. What ground have you for your guess?"

I was back in my chair. "Partly personal," I told him, "and partly professional. Personal, my general impression of her, and specifically her smile when I let her in. Professional, two points. First, if she shot him last night after making an appointment with you and then came here with that jabber, she is either completely loony or the trickiest specimen I have ever laid eyes on, and I'll buy neither one. Second, and this is really it, her face when she realized he was dead. She might fake a faint or the staggers or even some fancy hysterics, but no woman alive could make her blood go like that. I said I would need facts to make it final, but I should have said I would need facts, and good ones, to make me guess again."

Wolfe grunted and turned to her with a scowl. "Granting that Mr. Goodwin's grounds are valid, what then? When the police learn that the widow of a man murdered last night came to see me this morning, they will harass me beyond tolerance. I owe you nothing. You are not my client. You have paid me a hundred dollars for half an hour of my time, now stretched to more than an hour, and released me from my promise, so that incident is closed. You asked me to tell you what to say when they ask you what you came here for, but they will also ask me. What if you fail to follow my advice and my account differs from yours? Why should I take that risk? I can see no alternative— What are you doing now?"

She had opened her bag and was taking out the checkfold and pen. "I'm going to write a check," she said. "Then I'll be your client. What shall I—how much?"

He nodded. "I expected that too. It won't do. I am not a blackmailer. I take pay for services, not for forbearance, and you may not need my services. If you do, we'll see. Will you answer some questions?"

"Of course. But I've taken more than my half an hour, and I owe you—"

"No. If you didn't shoot

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your husband we have both been snared by circumstance. First, instead of a question, a statement: you can't take the gun. The gun stays here. Now. When and where did—"

"But I'm going to put it back where I got it!"

"No. I accept Mr. Goodwin's guess as a hypothesis, but I can't let you take the gun. When and where did you last see your husband?"

"Last night. At home. We had people for dinner."

"Details. How many people? Their names."

"They were clients of Barry's, important clients—all but one. Mrs. Victor Oliver. Anne Talbot, Mrs. Henry Lewis Talbot. Jules Khoury. Ambrose Perdis. Ted—Theodore Weed—he's not a client, he works for Barry. Seven, counting Barry and me."

"When did the guests leave?"

"I don't know exactly. Barry had told me he was going to discuss something with them, and I wouldn't be needed, and after the coffee I left. That's when I last saw him, there with them. I went upstairs to my bedroom."

"Did you hear him when he went up to bed?"

"No. There's a spare bedroom between his room and mine. And I was played out. I told you, I had the first good night's sleep I have had for a month."

"You didn't see him this morning?"

"No. He wasn't there. He rises early. The maid who—oh. Oh!"

"What?"

"Nothing—nothing that matters to you. I am not liking myself, Mr. Wofe. I said he rises early, but now I can say he rose early, and I wanted to sing it. I did! No one is good enough to have a right to be glad that someone has died. The Lord knows I'm not. What if I never loved him? What if I married him because—"

Wolfe cut her off. "If you please. You'll have plenty of time for that. About the maid?"

She swallowed with her lips pressed tight. "I'm sorry. The maid who sleeps in and gets breakfast said he hadn't come down, and she had gone up and the door of his room was open and his bed hadn't been slept in. He had done that before, not very often, once or twice a month."

"Without telling you where he was going or, afterwards, where he had been?"

"Yes."

"Do you know or can you guess where he went last night, or with whom, or to whom?"

"No. I have no idea."

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"I am still assuming that you didn't kill him, but how vulnerable are you? Were you continually in your house—it is a house, not an apartment?"

"Yes."

"Were you in it continually from the time you went to your bedroom last night until you left this morning?"

"Yes."

"Would the maid have heard you if you had gone out during the night? Sneaked out, and later in again?"

"I don't think so. Her room is in the basement."

Wolfe nodded. "You *are* vulnerable. What time did you leave this morning?"

"At five minutes past eleven. I wanted to be sure to get here on time."

"When did you take the gun from the drawer in your husband's room?"

"Just before I left. I didn't decide to bring it until the last minute."

"How many people know that you despised your husband?"

She gazed at him, not blinking, no reply.

" 'Despise' is your word, Mrs. Hazen. It is not adequate. No one kills a man, or wants to, merely because she despises him. But I'm not going into that. How many people know that you despised him?"

"I don't think anyone does." It was barely audible, and I have good ears. "I have never told anyone, not even my best friend. She may have suspected. I suppose she did."

"Pfui." Wolfe flipped a hand. "Your maid knows, for one, if she's not a dolt. She is of course being questioned at this moment. Was your husband wealthy?"

"I don't know. He had a large income, he must have, he was free with money. He owned the house."

"Any children?"

"No."

"You will inherit?"

Her eyes flashed. "Mr. Wolfe, this is ridiculous! I don't *want* anything from him!"

"I am merely examining your position. You will inherit?"

"Yes. He told me I would."

"Didn't he know you despised him?"

"He was incapable of believing that anyone could despise him. I suppose he was a psychopath. I looked up psychopathy in the dictionary."

"No doubt that was a help." He looked up at the wall clock. "I presume you will now go home. Since you must tell the police that you were here you might as well say that you learned of your husband's death from my radio; it will save you

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the bother of feigning surprise and shock." He eyed her. "I said you would be in a pickle, and you are. When I am asked what you wanted of me, I shall say that you consulted me in confidence and I will reveal nothing of your conversation. It will be a little ticklish, but until and unless you are arrested on a charge of murder the pressure will not be intolerable. So you may tell them as much about your visit here, or as little, as you please."

She opened her bag. "I'm going to write a check. You must take it. You *must!*"

"No. You may not be in jeopardy. They may get the murderer today or tomorrow. If they do I may send you a bill for the extra hour; it will depend on my mood. If they don't, and you wish to engage my services, and Mr. Goodwin's guess has not been discredited, we'll see." He pushed his chair back and stood up.

She rose to her feet, steady this time, and I went and held her coat for her.

When I returned to the office after letting her out, Wolfe had straightened up in his chair to lean forward, and, with his head cocked, was sniffing the air. For a second I thought he was pretending that our ex-client had polluted the atmosphere with perfume, but then I realized that he was merely trying to catch an odor from the kitchen, where Fritz was baking scallops in shells—or probably, since I could catch the odor without sniffing, he was deciding whether Fritz had used only shallots in the sauce or had added an onion. By the time I got to my chair he had settled it; anyway, he turned to me.

"I do not intend," he stated, "to serve the convenience of a murderer. What about her face? I was at one side."

"One will get you fifty," I said. "You heard her stutter that I was m-m-making it up. Then when I said no, he had been shot dead and it hit her as a fact, she went white, all white, in three seconds. Maybe she can wiggle her ears, but she can't do that. No one can."

"Very well. Call Mr. Cohen and get details."

"Anything in particular?"

"Whatever he has, but I want to know if the weapon has been found, or a bullet."

"He would appreciate a major scoop, such as that the widow of the deceased visited the office of Nero Wolfe this morning. Why not, since she's going to report it?"

"Very well."

I got at the phone and dialed the number of the *Gazette*, and soon had Lon Cohen. When I

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tossed him the bone about Mrs. Hazen coming to see Wolfe, naturally he wanted the whole skeleton, not to mention meat, but I told him that would be all for now and how about some reciprocity? He obliged, and gave me the crop, and I thanked him and hung up and turned to Wolfe.

"The body was found by a truck driver at ten eighteen a.m. It was stiff, so he must have been dead at least five hours and probably more. He was fully dressed, including an overcoat, and his hat was there on the ground. The usual items in his pockets, including a couple of dollars in change, except that there were no keys, and no wallet and no watch. Of course they could have been taken by someone who found him earlier and forgot to mention it. His name was on letters in his pocket, so the wallet wasn't taken to delay identification.

"Shot once, in the back, and a rib stopped the bullet and they have it. A thirty-two. Weapon not found. If the police have any leads or notions they're saving them, but of course it was found less than three hours ago." I glanced at my wrist. "Two hours and forty-nine minutes. Lon says he would have paid me five grand if I had kept Mrs. Hazen here until he could send a man to take her picture and ask her who shot her husband, and I told him I'll bear that in mind next time."

"They have the bullet."

"Right."

"When will a policeman come?"

"It will probably be Cramer in person. You know how he'll react when he learns she was here. Say two hours, possibly sooner."

"Will she report what she told me?"

"No."

A corner of his mouth twitched. "That's why I put up with you; you could have answered with fifty words and you did it with one."

"I've often wondered. Now tell me why I put up with you."

"That's beyond conjecture. I want a bullet that has been fired from that gun, and we shouldn't wait until after lunch. You have twenty minutes. If your guess about Mrs. Hazen is correct, that gun is not evidence, unless the murderer stole into that house afterwards, went to Mr. Hazen's room, returned the gun to the drawer, and slipped out again. If it *is* evidence you'll be tampering with it. Shall I do it?"

"No. You might shoot a toe off." I got the gun from the drawer, removed one of the

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cartridges, unlocked and opened the drawer where we keep the Marleys for which we have permits, and got a .32 cartridge from the box. I put that cartridge in the Drexel where I had made room for it, turned the cylinder so it would be in firing position, went to the hall and downstairs to the storage room in the basement, switched the light on, and crossed to where a discarded mattress was doubled up on a table. I had used it for this operation before. I cocked the revolver, held it three inches from the mattress, and pulled the trigger.

You would suppose that all .32 cartridges would send a bullet the same distance into a mattress, the same mattress, but they don't. It took me a quarter of an hour to find it, and by the time I got back upstairs Wolfe was at table in the dining room, which is across the hall from the office. Before I joined him I removed the shell, returned the Drexel's own cartridge to its place, and put the gun in the safe and the bullet in an envelope in my desk drawer.

We were back in the office, Wolfe dictating and me taking, when company came. I had been right on both counts: it was Inspector Cramer in person, and it was 2:55 when the doorbell rang and I went to the hall for a look through the one-way glass panel in the front door, and there he was on the stoop, no sign of a sag in the heavy broad shoulders, the round red face framed by his turned-up overcoat collar and the brim of his gray felt which should have been retired long ago.

Since he had no appointment it would have been proper to open the door the two inches allowed by the chain bolt and greet him through the crack, but that always annoyed him, and if it turned out that I had tampered with evidence it wouldn't hurt to show him now that I had my good points. So I pulled the door wide open. Without even a nod, let alone a civil greeting, he crossed the sill, tramped down the hall into the office and on to Wolfe's desk, and demanded, "What time did Mrs. Barry Hazen get here this morning?"

Wolfe tilted his head back to look up at him and inquired, "Is that snow on your hat?"

Having entered and detoured around him, I too looked at the hat. There was nothing whatever on it except signs of age, and outdoors the sun was shining. It would fluster any man to have it put to him that one removes one's hat when one enters a house, but Cramer

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is ready for anything when he faces Wolfe. It didn't faze him. He merely barked, "I asked you a question!"

"Half-past eleven," Wolfe said.

"When did she leave?"

"Shortly before one o'clock."

Cramer took his overcoat off, ignored my offer to take it, put it on the arm of the red leather chair, and sat. "An hour and a half," he said, not barking but a little hoarse. He is always a little hoarse when he is dealing with Wolfe. "What did she have to say?" He hadn't touched the hat.

Wolfe swiveled and leaned back. "Mr. Cramer. I know that Mrs. Hazen's husband has been shot and killed. She was with me when the news came on my radio. I know that when I have been consulted by a person who is in any way connected with a death by violence you automatically assume that I have knowledge of evidence that would be useful in your investigation. Sometimes your assumption is valid; sometimes it isn't. This time it isn't; that is my considered opinion. Mrs. Hazen consulted me in confidence. If at any time I have reason to think that by refusing to disclose what she told me I am obstructing justice, I'll communicate with you."

Cramer got a cigar from a pocket, rolled it between his palms, stuck it in his mouth, and clamped his teeth on it. He does that instead of counting ten, when he knows that the words that are on his tongue would make things worse instead of better. He took the cigar from his mouth. "Someday," he said, "you're going to fall off and get hurt, and this could be it. If and when you find it gets too hot to hang onto it any longer, and you turn loose, and you have obstructed justice by not telling me now, I'll get your hide. Nothing and no one will stop me. I'm asking you to tell me what Mrs. Barry Hazen said when she came to see you nine hours after her husband was murdered."

Wolfe shook his head. "I decline to tell you because I believe, as matters stand now, that it is not pertinent to your inquiry. Should I have occasion to change my mind—and by the way, I can offer you an opportunity to change it for me. Archie, where's that bullet?"

I got the envelope from my drawer, took the bullet out, and handed it to him. Cramer's sharp gray eyes were on me and followed the bullet back to Wolfe. Wolfe took it in his fingers, barely glanced at it,

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handed it back to me, and said, "Give it to Mr. Cramer." As I did so he turned to Cramer. "This will be pointless if you have found the weapon that was used to shoot Mr. Hazen. Have you?"

"No."

"It will also be pointless if you have not found the bullet that killed him. Have you?"

"Yes."

"Then I suggest that you have your laboratory compare that bullet with it. If you find that they were shot by the same gun let me know at once and I'll have some information for you. I would want to see the laboratory report, certified."

"You would." Cramer's eyes were slits and his lips tightened. "Where did you get this bullet?"

"I'll tell you, or I won't, when I get your report."

"By God." Cramer was hoarser. "This *is* pertinent. This is evidence. I'll take you down, both of you—"

"Nonsense. Evidence of what? I don't know and neither do you. If it wasn't fired by the gun that killed Mr. Hazen it is evidence of nothing, and I am not obliged to account for it until I know. I'm not indulging in a prank, Mr. Cramer. There is possibility that the bullets will match, and if so it will indeed be evidence. Let me know."

Cramer opened his mouth to say something, vetoed it, got to his feet, put the bullet in his pocket, threw the cigar at my wastebasket and missed, picked up his coat and put it on, ignoring my offer to help, and marched out. I went to the hall to see that when the door shut he was on the outside.

When I returned to the office Wolfe growled. "Confound these interruptions. We have forty minutes. Where were we on that letter to Mr. Hewitt?" I sat, got my notebook, and told him.

At four o'clock, when he left to go up to the plant rooms for his two-hour afternoon session with the orchids, I got busy at the typewriter. On various occasions I have had a little trouble turning out perfect letters to orchid collectors and providers of food specialties when my mind had other interests and concerns, and that day was one of the worst.

Cramer had left at 3:20. He would lose no time getting the bullet to the laboratory; they probably had it by 3:50, or four o'clock at the latest. Examining two bullets with a comparison microscope is a simple chore; ten minutes is ample to decide if they were fired by the same gun. 4:10. Allow a quarter of an hour for writing the report, which

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wouldn't have to be in shape for a judge and jury. 4:25. Cramer would have a man there waiting for it. He should phone by 4:30, or ring the doorbell by 4:45. He didn't.

By 5:15 I had to keep my jaw set to hit the right keys. If you think I was keyed up more than the circumstances warranted, look it over. If the bullets matched I was a sap. It was a million to one that the murderer hadn't sneaked into the house to put the gun back in the drawer in Hazen's room; why would he? Murderers often do crazy things, but not that crazy. Therefore Mrs. Hazen had lied, and she had either killed him or knew who did, and I was a beetlehead. I had to do three of the letters twice.

By six o'clock, when Wolfe came down from the plant rooms, I had begun to relax. He went to his desk and started on the letters I had put there, which he always reads with care. After he had finished a couple and signed them I remarked, "Of course Cramer wouldn't bother to phone if the bullets didn't match."

He grunted.

"And the laboratory got it more than two hours ago, so we might as well—"

The doorbell rang, and the bottom of my spine curled. Cramer had waited until six o'clock, when he knew Wolfe would be available. I went to the hall and switched the stoop light on, and my spine went back to normal. It was a stranger, a man about my age, maybe a little younger, with no hat and a mop of brown hair shuffled by the wind.

I had never been so delighted to see a stranger, but had it under control by the time I got to the door and opened it and said, "Yes, sir?"

"I want to see Nero Wolfe. My name's Weed, Theodore Weed."

I should have had him wait there while I went and told Wolfe. That was the routine, but I was so glad to see him that I invited him in and helped him off with his coat. Then I went to the office and announced, "Theodore Weed to see you. One of the dinner guests. The one who—"

"What does he want?"

He knew damn well I hadn't had time to ask what he wanted. I said, "You."

"No. I've been pestered enough on a matter in which I have no interest. Tell him so and don't—"

Weed was there. He crossed to the red leather chair, plumped into it as if he owned it, and said, "I'm not going to pester you. I'm going to hire you."

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Wolfe glared at me. I had let a man in without consulting him; he would have something to say about that when we were alone. Weed was going on. "I know you come high, but I pay my bills. Do you want a retainer?"

Wolfe had transferred the glare to him. "No. You not only intrude, you presume. Archie, show him the door."

"Now wait a minute. I'm not very. . ." He let it hang and started to work his jaw. He had plenty of jaw, a little bony but not out of proportion. He got it under control. "All right, I started wrong. I'll try again. Mrs. Barry Hazen came to see you this morning and left a gun with you. Where is it?"

"Intrusion and presumption," Wolfe said, "and now effrontery. I must insist—"

"Damn it, I know she did! She told me so! She was here when she heard about it, that they had found his body! And she wanted to hire you, she wanted to give you a check, and you wouldn't take it!"

He paused to control his jaw. "So I want to hire you, and I'll pay your bill. I just left the District Attorney's office and she's still there. They wouldn't let me see her, but she's there and they're going to charge her with murder. I can't see why it's presumption for me to want to hire you—you're in the detective business and my money is as good as anybody's. All right, I got ahead of myself asking you about the gun, but when I'm your client there's no reason why you shouldn't tell me where it is."

He stuck a hand in his pocket and brought out a wad of bills, not a thick one, and unfolded it.

I was trying to decide. Either he thought that Lucy Hazen had killed her husband and was being chivalrous, or he didn't think she had but was selling Wolfe the idea that he did think so. Whichever it was, he was willing to spend money on it, for he got up from his chair to put the bills on Wolfe's desk.

As Wolfe started to speak the phone rang, and I turned and got it. It was Lucy Hazen. She asked for Wolfe, and I told her to hold it and turned to him. "The woman that brought the sausage this morning wants to know if it will do. If you want to ask Fritz you can talk on the kitchen extension."

He got up and went, and I held on. In a moment his voice was in my ear. "This is Nero Wolfe. Mrs. Hazen?"

"Yes. You said this morning that if I need your services you would see." Her voice was shaky. "I do need them. I'm going to be arrested, and I—"

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"Where are you?"

"At the District Attorney's. I don't know any —"

"Say only what you must say on the telephone."

"I'm in a booth with the door closed."

"Pfui. It is probably not only heard but also recorded. Say only what you must."

"All right." A little pause. "He said I could phone a lawyer, and I don't know any except my husband's, and I don't want him. Will you get one for me?"

"I'll send one to you. After speaking with him you can decide whether to engage him."

"I will. Of course. But I want to engage you too. You said you would if I needed you."

"I said I would see." A pause, longer than hers. If he committed himself he would have to work, and he would rather eat than work. "Very well." He growled it. "I am engaged. One question: have you disclosed any of your conversation with me? Yes or no."

"No."

"Satisfactory. One instruction: if you have an intention to reject property left you by your husband you will neither declare it nor indicate it. You're going to have some bills to pay."

"But I don't want anything from him! I told you—"

"We're on the phone. The lawyer will join me in that instruction. His name is Nathaniel Parker. Archie, get Mr. Parker. I'll talk from here."

I pushed the button down, released it, dialed Parker's home number, got him, buzzed the kitchen, and Wolfe got on. He gave Parker the necessary facts, and not much more—nothing of what Mrs. Hazen had told us that morning, nothing about the gun. He did say that I had formed the conclusion that she had not shot her husband, and that he had accepted it.

Parker was to arrange for bail if she was bailable; if they held her on the big charge he was to get what he could at the D.A.'s office. I waited to hang up until Wolfe was at the office door. He went to his desk, sat, leveled his eyes at Theodore Weed, and spoke.

"Now, sir. That was timely. It was Mrs. Hazen on the phone. I have sent—"

"Where is she?"

"At the District Attorney's office. She thinks she is going to be held. I have sent a lawyer to her and I have agreed to act in her behalf. You were assuming that I declined her offer of a check because I thought she was guilty of murder or at least was

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implicated, but you were wrong. She is now my client." He wiggled a finger at the bills on the desk. "Your money. Take it."

Weed's jaw was hanging, his lips parted. He found words. "But you— I don't see why you—"

"You're not obliged to see and I'm not obliged to explain. Why do you think Mrs. Hazen killed her husband? Was it merely surmise?"

"I don't— I don't think she killed him. She didn't!"

"If I had taken your money what were you going to ask me to do?"

"I don't know exactly. I was going to consult you. I wanted to know what you did with the gun. Have the police got it?"

Wolfe shook his head. "I am acting for her now, Mr. Weed. You are the enemy—one of them. What if you killed Mr. Hazen, or know who did, and would like to see it imputed to her, and suspecting, for whatever reason, that she left a gun with me this morning, you want to find out? What if you are indeed the enemy?"

Weed sat and stared at him. His jaw started to work again and he stopped it. "Look here," he said. "I want to know something. I know your reputation, I know about you. Is that straight, Mrs. Hazen phoned you just now and you're working for her?"

"It is."

"All right, then this is straight too." He stuck an arm out. "You can cut off this arm if it will help her any. And the other one. If that's corny, okay, that's where I stand."

Wolfe regarded him with narrowed eyes. So did I. He looked as if he meant it, but even if he did, that didn't make him our pal. If he would give an arm to help her, and if he had known how she felt about her husband, he might have taken steps to get rid of him for her, which wouldn't cost him even a finger if he was lucky.

Wolfe made a tent with his fingers, his elbows on the chair arms. He said, "I have no use for your arm, but some information might be helpful. When did you last see Mr. Hazen?"

"I want to know where that gun is. I know she left it here, she told me so."

"When did she tell you?"

"This afternoon. I was there when she came home."

"What else did she tell you?"

"Not much—there wasn't time. We were interrupted. I knew Hazen had a gun in a drawer in his room, and I had looked to see if it was there and it wasn't, and I asked her if she knew where it was. Have the police got it?"

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"No. I'll indulge you further, Mr. Weed. The bullet that killed Mr. Hazen wasn't fired by that gun. If you already knew that it's no news for you; if you didn't, it should relieve—"

"How do you know it wasn't?"

"Enough for you that I do. Now you indulge me. When did you last see Mr. Hazen?"

"This morning. At the morgue. I went there to identify him, by request. Alive, I saw him last at his house, last night."

"At what hour?"

"Around half-past nine. Five or ten minutes either way. The police wanted it more exact, but that's as close as I can come."

"The circumstances?"

"There were people there for dinner. Do you want their names?"

"Yes."

"They were clients of Hazen's. Mrs. Victor Oliver, a widow. Mrs. Henry Lewis Talbot, the wife of the banker. Ambrose Perdis, the shipping tycoon. Jules Khoury, the inventor. And Mr. and Mrs. Hazen and me. Seven. After dinner Hazen told Lucy—his wife—that we were going to discuss a business matter and she left. I left soon after that, and that was the last I saw him alive, there with them."

"How did you spend the next six hours?"

"I walked to the Overseas Press Club—it's a short walk—and was there until around midnight, then I went home and went to bed. And stayed in bed."

"You were associated with Mr. Hazen in his business?"

"I was in his employ."

"In what capacity?"

"Mostly I write stuff. Handouts, plugs, the usual junk. Also I was supposed to use my contacts. I was a newspaperman when Hazen hired me a little more than a year ago."

"If they were going to discuss a business matter why did you leave?"

"I wasn't needed. Or wanted."

"Then why were you there at all?"

Weed put his hands on the chair arms, levered his fanny up, settled farther back, and took a breath. He rubbed the chair arms with his palms. "You don't think Lucy killed him," he said. "Or you wouldn't be working for her. But even if she didn't she's in one hell of a jam. If you're half as good as you're supposed to be. . .I don't know. Maybe I ought to give you a different answer than the one I gave the District Attorney when he asked why I was there. The right answer. Even if it makes

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you think *I* killed him. I didn't."

"If you did, Mr. Weed, you're doomed in any case, no matter what answers you give."

"Okay, then here's why I was there. Exclusive for you. Hazen liked to have me in the same room with his wife because he knew how I felt about her. God only knows how he knew. I certainly tried not to show it and I thought I did pretty well, and I'm sure she doesn't know, but he did. He was a remarkable man. He had a sixth sense about people, and maybe a seventh and an eighth. but he also had blind spots. He actually didn't know how his wife felt about him, or if he did he was even more remarkable than I thought."

"Did you know?"

"Of course."

"She told you?"

"My God, no. I doubt if she even told her best friend. Don't think that the way I feel about her made me imagine it. I saw her when he touched her, how she tried to cover up. So that's why I was invited to dinner last night. I don't think he expected or hoped to see me squirm; he didn't have to, he knew how I felt. Of course he was a sadist, but he was a damned subtle one. I was onto him, in a way, after I had been with him a couple of months, but I didn't leave because I. . .I had met her."

"And your feeling for her was returned?"

"Certainly not. I was just a guy who worked for her husband."

"Rather a forlorn situation for you."

"Yeah. That's the right word, forlorn. I told you because you asked why I was there, and I've got a little idea how you work, and you're working for her. Another thing you might want to know: I think there was something screwy about his business. I know the public-relations game is mostly just a high-grade racket, but even so.

"Take the four people who were there last night. Why did Mrs. Victor Oliver, the sixty-year-old widow of a millionaire broker, pay him two thousand dollars a month? She needs public relations like I need a hole in the head. The same for Mrs. Talbot—twenty-five hundred a month. Maybe her husband, the banker, could use a P.R. expert, granted that there is one, but why her? Jules Khoury's amounts vary, sometimes a couple of thousand, sometimes more. Possibly an inventor likes to stand in well with the public, though I don't see why, and during the time I've been there Khoury has got

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damn little for his money.

"Ambrose Perdis is the screwiest of all. For his business, his shipping corporations, he uses one of the big P.R. operators, Codray Associates; but personally he has paid Hazen more than forty thousand dollars this past year. I'm not supposed to know all this. I got curious and looked at the records one day."

Wolfe grunted. "A man who hires another man to forge distinction for him deserves as little as he gets. Are you suggesting that Mr. Hazen extorted those sums?"

"I don't know, but he didn't earn them. I admit that very few P.R. operators do earn what they get. If any."

"Did he have any clients other than those four?"

"Sure, about a dozen. Fifteen altogether, as of yesterday. His total take was over a quarter of a million a year."

Wolfe looked up at the clock. "It will be my dinner time in five minutes. If my assumption that Mrs. Hazen didn't kill her husband is correct, and if you didn't, who did?"

That question gets a helpful answer about once in a hundred times. It was obvious that Weed had given it no brain room at all before he rang our doorbell, because he had either thought that Lucy had done it or known that he had, so he had no guesses ready. He was more than willing; the idea appealed to him; but he had to start from scratch, and five minutes wasn't enough.

He thought that Wolfe should forget about dinner, though he didn't say so, which was just as well. He said he would return after dinner, but Wolfe said no, if he would leave his phone number he would hear from us. He would have left the bills there on Wolfe's desk if I hadn't handed them to him.

By the time we had finished dinner and were back in the office, with coffee, I had no personal worry. If the bullets had matched we would have heard from Cramer by then. Wolfe got at the letters to sign, still on his desk, and as he finished the last one and I took it he spoke. "Did Mr. Weed shoot him?"

"No comment. I'd have to flip a coin. He cleared up one point, anyway, about her. You said that no one wants to kill a man merely because she despises him. Sure. So what was eating her? Weed. He says she doesn't know how he feels about her and the feeling is not returned. Nuts. Either he lies or he's simple. Of the ten

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thousand women I have fallen in love with, every single one of them knew it before I did. As for Weed shooting him, I am split. It would be tough to send her a bill for nailing him, but if he didn't you've got a job. Where do you start? Apparently Hazen was the kind of specimen—"

The doorbell rang. Could Cramer possibly have held off so long? No. It would be Weed, to help some more. No. It was a more familiar figure, a tall thin middle-aged man in a dark gray overcoat that had been cut to give him more shoulder, but not overdoing it. Nathaniel Parker had his clothes made by Stover.

When I opened the door and greeted and admitted him he headed for the office, keeping his coat on and his homburg in his hand, and I followed.

He was one of the eight men, not counting me, that Wolfe shook hands with. He declined Wolfe's invitation to be seated, saying that he was an hour and a half late for a dinner appointment. "I stopped in instead of phoning," he said, "because I had to deliver this." He took a key from his pocket and handed it to me. "That's the key to Mrs. Hazen's house. Also this."

From his inside pocket he took a folded paper. "That's authority from her to enter and get something. What you're to get, if you want to, is an iron box—she said iron but I suppose it's tin or steel—that is under the bottom drawer of the chest in Hazen's bedroom. You remove the drawer and pry up the board that it slides in on, and the box is underneath. She doesn't know what's in it. One day about a year ago Hazen lifted the board and showed her the box, and told her that if he died she was to get the box, have it opened by a locksmith, and burn the contents without looking at them. I thought you might want to have a look, and she is willing. You'll be acting for her, through her attorney."

Wolfe grunted. "I'll use my discretion."

"I know you will. If you don't want to tell me what was in it you'll say it was empty. I'd like to be present when it's opened, but I have an appointment. As for her, what did she tell you this morning?"

"Ask her."

"I did. She wouldn't tell me. She said she would disclose it only if you told her to. If she is charged with homicide I'll want to know that or I'll step out. She has been there more than five hours and they'll probably keep her another five. If she is held as a material witness I can do nothing about bail until morning. I have an appointment

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with Hazen's lawyer at nine thirty. He has the will. Anything else now?"

Wolfe said no, and he went. I escorted him out, returned to the office and asked, "Any special instructions?"

"No. Will the police be there?"

"I shouldn't think so. It's only where he lived—he wasn't shot there. Do I wear gloves?"

"No. You have her authority."

Ever since a difficulty I got into some years ago I have made it a practice to have a gun along when I am on an errand that may interfere with a murderer's program. I took off my jacket, got a shoulder holster and a Marley, which I loaded, from the drawer, put them where they belonged, put the jacket back on, checked that Lucy's key was in one pocket and her authority in another, and went out.

I stood across the street from the Hazen house, on 37th Street between Park and Lexington, for a look. It was brick, painted gray with green trim, four stories, narrower than Wolfe's brownstone, with the entrance three steps down from the sidewalk. I noted those details just for the record, but they weren't important. What was important was that there was a tiny sliver of light at the lower part of the right edge of one of the three windows on the third floor—a sliver that you might leave if you weren't quite thorough enough when you arrange a drape.

I didn't know where Hazen's room was; that could be it. It could be a Homicide man looking things over, but it wasn't probable; they had had ten hours. It could be the maid who slept in, but why, at 9:30 at night? Her room certainly wasn't third floor front. Whoever it was and whatever he was doing, I decided not to interrupt him by ringing.

I crossed over, descended the three steps, used the key, opened the door with care, entered, closed it with more care, and stood and listened while my eyes adjusted to the dark. For half a minute there was no sound from any direction; then there was something like a bump from up above, followed by a voice, male, very faint. Unless he was talking to himself there was more than one. Thinking there might be occasion for activity, I took off my overcoat and put it on the floor, and my hat, and then tiptoed along the hall, feeling my way, found the stairs, and started up.

Halfway up I stopped. Had there been another voice, a

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soprano? There had. There was. Then the baritone again. I went on up, with more care now and slower, keeping to the end of the steps next the wall. In the hall on the second floor there was a little light coming from above, enough to catch outlines. Up the second flight I went even slower, since each step might bring me within range. The voices had stopped, but there were tapping sounds.

On the fourth step I could get my eyes to the level of the floor by stretching. The hall was the same as the floor below, and the light was coming from a half-open door at its front end. All I could see inside was a chair and part of a bed and drapes over a window, and the back of a woman's head over the back of the chair, silvery hair under a black pancake hat.

I might have stayed put until the voice came again, and now I could get words, but a staircase is not a good tactical position. The light was on them, not me, and at the top I would be nearly out of range through the opening. I moved. As I put my weight on the next to last step the tapping stopped and the baritone came.

"There's no sense in this." I made the landing and across to the wall. The soprano came. "There certainly isn't, Mr. Khoury." I started along the wall toward the door. Another female voice came, pitched lower. "I don't think it's here. It could be in Lucy's room, that would be like him." Then another man's voice, a deeper one. "All right, we'll try it," and the door swung wide and the man was there, on the move.

I'm not proud of the next two seconds. I was alerted and he wasn't, and I think I am fairly fast. My excuse is that I was in the middle of a careful step, putting my toe down, but anyway he was at me before I was set, and he damn near toppled me. When you're thrown off balance by impact you only make it worse if you try to get purchase on your way down, so I let myself go, brought my knees up to my chin as I hit the floor, rolled to get my feet at his middle, and let him have it.

He was plenty heavy, but it tore him loose and sent him bouncing off the wall. As I sprang to my feet another man was through the door and coming. I sidestepped and ducked, jerking my right back, and hooked him in the kidney. He doubled up and hugged himself, and I kept going to the corner, whirled, had the Marley in my hand, and showed it.

"Come right ahead," I said,

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"if you want your skull cracked."

The first man, the heavy one, was propped against the wall, panting. The smaller one was trying to straighten up. There was a woman in the doorway, the one who had been in the chair, and another one behind her.

"Also," I said, "this thing is loaded, so don't try reaching for a cigarette. Inside, everybody, and take it easy. I would prefer to get you in the shoulder or leg, but I'm not a very good shot."

The heavy man said, "Who are you?"

"Billy the Kid. Come on, into the room, and no gymnastics. Go to the far side and face the wall."

They moved. As they approached the door the women backed off, and they entered and I followed. The woman with silvery hair started to chatter at me, but I wiggled the gun and told her to go to the wall. When they were there I went over the men from behind, felt no weapons, told them to stay put, and sidestepped to the bed. There were coats and hats on it, and the women's bags.

I had the men tagged; the husky one was Ambrose Perdis, the shipping magnate, whose picture I had seen here and there, and I had heard the other one called Khoury; but I needed introductions to the women. As I opened one of the bags and dumped its contents on the bed Perdis turned around and I spoke. "Hold it. I'm giving you a break. Shall I come and slap you with the gun? Turn around."

He turned. A leather case from the bag was stuffed with credentials—driver's license, credit cards, others. Some of them said Anne Talbot and others Mrs. Henry Lewis Talbot. That was the young woman, whose attractions, both from the front and the rear, were so obvious that they had caught my eye even though my eyes were busy.

There was a leather keyfold and I snapped it open to inspect the keys, and compared one of them with the key to the house which I had in my pocket. It didn't match.

I returned the items to the bag one by one and picked up the other bag and dumped it. The woman with silvery hair was Mrs. Victor Oliver. There was no key in her bag like the one I had, and nothing of interest. I examined the pockets of the coats, all four of them, and found no key.

As I stepped around the end of the bed I allowed myself a grin at a detail I had observed:

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they all had gloves on—not rubber ones secured for the occasion, just gloves.

"Now that I know your names," I said, "it's only fair that you should know mine. Archie Goodwin. I work for a man you may have heard of, Nero Wolfe, the private detective. He has been hired by Mrs. Barry Hazen, and I have her key to the house and her written authority to enter. I need to know which one of you has a key and I'm going to find out. You may turn around, but stay where you are. You will take off your clothes and pile them on the floor, including your shoes and socks or stockings, but I think not your underwear. I'll see."

They were facing me at four paces. Anne Talbot said, "I won't. It's outrageous." She was extremely easy to look at.

"Pooh," I said. "Pretend you're at the beach or a pool. Do you want me to peel you? Don't think I wouldn't."

"We have no key," Mrs. Oliver said. She was easy to look away from, with her flabby jowl and little yellow eyes set deep. "The maid let us in. She has gone out, but when she comes back you can ask her."

"She'll deny it," Jules Khoury said. He was the baritone, a swarthy specimen.

"Look," I said, "you're four to one. If you make me do it the hard way it will be rough. I'll give you two minutes to get your clothes off." I raised my wrist to see my watch without dropping my eyes. "Start with the gloves. I want them too."

"Is this necessary?" Perdis demanded. "Is it so important how we got in?"

"Yes. There were no keys in Hazen's pockets. Twenty seconds gone."

I am enough of a gentleman to turn my back or at least avert my eyes when a lady is undressing, but one of those ladies might possibly have had a gun on her leg, so I forgot my manners. It took the men twice as long as the women. I decided to let Anne Talbot keep her bra and panties; she would have had no reason to bury the key as deep as that.

Mrs. Oliver's girdle was so tight she couldn't have slipped a key inside even if she had tried. Khoury had jockeys, no undershirt. Perdis had a baby-blue silk altogether, to the knees. I had them turn around, and then used a foot to rake Perdis' pile across the rug, out of range of a kick.

It took longer than it should on account of the gun in my hand, and of course I not only looked for the key but for any other item that might be

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helpful. No soap. Khoury had a keyfold and Perdis a keyring, but no soap. It wasn't much of a letdown because I had expected it when they all shed and turned their backs. If one of them had had Hazen's key he would either have tried to ditch it or produced it and tried to explain it.

Now that I was certain none of them had a cannon or a bomb I could relax a little. I told them to dress, went to the stand at the head of the bed, lifted the receiver from the phone, and was dialing a number when Perdis' voice came.

"Wait a minute! One minute!" He had a touch of accent. "I have something to say. You are calling the police?"

"No." I cradled the receiver. "Say it fast and short."

He was handicapped for man-to-man talk, with his shirt on but his pants in his hands. "You are not a policeman," he said.

"No. I told you who I am."

"He's Archie Goodwin," Anne Talbot said. "I've seen him at the Flamingo."

"You are a private detective," Perdis said.

"Right."

"Then you do things for money. We will pay you fifty thousand dollars if you will leave this house and forget that you have been here. Half of it in cash tomorrow morning and the other half later. We will give you a satisfactory guarantee, perhaps something in writing."

"How much later?"

"That's hard to say. It is delicate. We would need to be sure of your forgetting until certain difficulties have ended."

"That's pretty vague. Get your clothes on and we'll see." I picked up the phone and dialed, and he started toward me. I showed the gun, but he kept coming, saying something, and I dropped the phone and moved to meet him, and damned if he didn't swerve around me and dart for the phone.

I had intended to tap him with the gun, not caring for bruised knuckles, but his swerve got him on the wrong side, so I took him from behind, with my left arm hooked under his chin and my hip at his rump, and levered him up and over. He landed on his hands and knees nine feet away. I said, "Cut out the horseplay and put your pants on," and went to the phone and dialed.

After nine buzzes Wolfe's voice came. "Yes?"

"Me. Could we use fifty grand?"

A grunt. "In the box?"

"No. I haven't got it yet. I'm in Hazen's bedroom. There are

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four people with me, two men and two women, lined up against the wall. The four that came to dinner last night. They were in this room looking for something and hadn't found it. Perdis just off—"

"One of them has Hazen's key."

"No. I had them strip and went through their clothes. They say the maid let them in. She's not here; of course they greased her. Perdis just offered me fifty grand to go away and forget I was here. I'll split it with you. He would probably double it."

"Pfui. Are you intact?"

"Sure. I'm calling just to tell you to expect us, say in half an hour, maybe less."

Silence. He would have to work, not tomorrow, but now—and two women. Then: "I suppose I must," and he hung up.

Perdis had joined the others at the wall. As I cradled the phone he spoke. "We will double it. One hundred thousand dollars."

"Skip it." I moved to the foot of the bed. "What would I tell my wife if I had one? You heard me tell Nero Wolfe to expect us in half an hour, but you have a choice. You can leave and go your ways and try to forget you were here, and I'll phone Inspector Cramer and report this incident, omitting nothing. Or you can come and talk it over with Nero Wolfe, and he may or may not care to bother Cramer about it. You may have two minutes to consider it." I looked at my wrist.

"Listen, Mr. Goodwin," Anne Talbot said. She had her clothes on, and with or without them she was highly ornamental. "We were looking for something that belongs to us. We're not thieves. We're respectable—"

I cut her off. "Sorry, but don't waste it on me. I just run errands. It's either Nero Wolfe or the police. If you pick Nero Wolfe there will be a slight delay because I have a little chore to do in this room. You will take your things and go downstairs and on out, and get two taxis. You will get into one of the taxis and wait there in front of the house, and have the other one there for me. I'll be down soon, probably in a couple of minutes. There's one complication: if you split and one or two of you prefer to go somewhere else, I'll phone the police immediately. I would rather not, but I'd have to."

Two of them, Perdis and Mrs. Oliver, started to speak, but I shut them off and moved away from the bed. Anne Talbot went to the bed and got

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her coat, and Khoury held it for her, then got his own. Anne Talbot said to Perdis and Mrs. Oliver, "Is there any alternative?" Perdis got Mrs. Oliver's coat and took it to her, and she went to the bed for her bag.

Perdis was the last one out. When he had started down the stair I shut the door, put a chair against it, went to the chest of drawers, a big heavy piece at the left wall, and took out the bottom drawer. There was a folded blanket in it. I squatted at the opening.

The board that the drawer slid on, solid, not a plywood panel, was flush and snugly fitted, no play to it. I tried to get its edge with my thumbnails; nothing doing. I got out my pocketknife, stuck the point of the blade in the crack at the center, just barely in, pried gently, and up it came. The front edge of the board was beveled. Very neat. I put my hand in, felt metal, got a finger under, and here came the box.

It was steel, anything but flimsy, twelve inches by six and about two inches deep, and weighed a good four pounds, with a lock not to be opened with a nail file. I shook it and heard no movement, which didn't prove anything. With the board down, I replaced the drawer, moved the chair away from the door and opened it, and went to the head of the stairs. No sound of voices from below. If I had gone down and joined them in the hall carrying a steel box which I must have found in Hazen's room they would have made quite a party of it.

I descended a flight, stood to listen half a minute, and went on down. They had turned on the light in the lower hall. My hat and coat were there on the floor. I put the Marley in the holster, put on the hat and coat, slipped the box under the coat, with my hand in my pocket holding it, turned out the light, and opened the door.

They had followed instructions to a T. Two taxis were there, and they were in the one in the rear, all four of them. After glancing in I told the driver to follow my taxi, went and got in and gave the driver the address, and we rolled.

(continued on page 135)

"Q"

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a *NEW* short short-short by

JANE SPEED

Can a complete story be written in less than 200 words? Complete with characters, conflict, climax? Try this one for size. . .

RECIPE FOR REVENGE

by JANE SPEED

It was a recipe for heartbreak: her love was forever, his only for a while.

She knew this, of course. She was not a fool. But forewarned is forearmed, she told herself.

Brave words, false words. His goodbye, as lightly given as his love, left her stunned and desolate.

Outwardly all went on as before. Her husband, who never suspected, continued to invite business associates to dinner to show off her charming skills; she was an excellent cook and an impeccable hostess. And she did not once fail him, though it seemed to her now a daily act of courage just to stay alive.

Why did she bother? What was she waiting for?

"By the way, my dear," her husband said one evening, "there'll be two guests for dinner on Saturday. Remember that pleasant young man who came here so often last year? Couldn't seem to get enough of your cooking. Well, he's just back from his honeymoon, so I've invited the newlyweds over for dinner. I didn't think you'd mind. You do that sort of thing well."

"Not at all," she assured him. And, smiling a Borgia smile, she set about planning her ultimate menu.

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a *NEW* short story by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

Joyce Harrington's newest short story shows her talent, her very real gift, in perhaps its finest light—a "regional" story, deeply observed and deeply felt, with a filigree of detail that is always precisely right, a story that is meaningful and moving and splendid. . .

THE CABIN IN THE HOLLOW

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

The dream came again last night. It seems like it came almost before I was asleep and lasted all night, even a few seconds after I woke up. Although I know that can't be true. I read in a magazine once about the scientists who measure dreams, and make lines on charts, and they all say that dreams only last a few seconds. They hook people up to machines while they're sleeping, and the machines can tell when they're dreaming and when not. I'd surely like to find out if my dream really lasts all night. But I wouldn't like to be hooked up to any machine. No sirree.

It's always summer in the dream. That's how I knew it was a dream the first time it came. It was full summer and the air was all hazy and lazy with the smell of hot dirt and piney woods. It seemed so real that when I woke up I almost thought I'd left the real world behind and was waking into a nightmare of coming to the city and living through the winter in three cold rooms high up in a rat-trap building without even a dirt yard and no real job after five months of walking the hard pavements.

In the dream I was standing in a dirt road that went uphill and around a bend. I knew I'd been climbing that road for a spell because I felt sweaty and just a mite tired, but a good kind of tired. On one side of the road was a big patch of horse nettles. Just beyond them and going on up the hillside was a clump of spindly pitch pines. On the other side of the road were some more horse

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nettles and then a grassy place with some boulders and a scramble of jack oaks going on down the hill.

I dreamed I just went over and set down in the grassy place with my back against a boulder and looked out over the hills and hollows and let the sun beat down on me. I set there for a long time. Maybe it was just a few seconds like the dream scientists say, but I watched the sun cross over the sky and listened to the click beetles and the bees buzzing around where there was a pipe vine crawling all over a dead tree trunk.

That's all there was that first time, except for some red squirrels carrying on in amongst the jack oaks, and my hand itching for my shotgun.

The dream came several times after that, maybe five or six. And it's always the same—the road and the horse nettles and the trees with the squirrels frisking in amongst them. But each time I have the dream something else is added on at the end. The second time of the dream I was setting there in the grassy place watching the squirrels and wishing for my shotgun, and I started to feel hungry like it was getting to be dinnertime. I got up from the grassy place and commenced walking on up the road. By and by I came to a big huckleberry bush hanging right out over the road. I stopped and ate some. Ate a lot, but there were plenty, and then I took off my hat and filled it to take some home to Glenna. That was the end that time.

Each time the dream came it would be the same, and each time at the end I would be a little further along that road and the sun would be a little further down the sky. Until finally, the way it was last night, I came to a bend in the road and I stood there with my hat full of huckleberries, knowing, just knowing, that when I got around that bend there would be a cabin with wood smoke coming from the chimney, and Glenna would be there with dinner on the table and the kids playing around in the dooryard. That was when I woke up, right there at the bend in the road with home just a few steps away.

I got up then. Gray winter light was coming in the window, and there was dirty gray snow on the window ledge. It was cold under the quilt even though I had my long johns on. I jumped out of bed. Well, call it a bed, but it's just a mattress on the floor. Got dressed in a hurry because I wanted to get down to the unemployment office early so I wouldn't have to wait so long in line.

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Glenna had a pot of coffee going and she had the gas oven on full blast with the door open so it was warmer in the kitchen. She was crumbling dry biscuits into bowls for the kids. She doused the crumbs with hot coffee and carefully measured a spoonful of condensed milk into each of the four bowls. Her hand shook a little over Calvin's bowl so he got a little extra.

"I'll just have some coffee," I said, before she could start crumbling up some biscuit for me. I wanted her to save some for herself. She was wearing the dress she always wore when she was in her last months and couldn't get into anything else. Not that she had much else to get into, but she loved that faded old calico dress with its lace-trimmed collar and its tiny buttons at the throat and the careful smocking across the front. Her mother had made it for her while she was waiting on Calvin to be born, and she'd worn it for each and every child after him.

The kids ate quietly and fast. Too quiet. It wasn't natural for kids to be that quiet. Glenna's raised them up to be polite and respectful to their elders, but this quiet was something else. Something lost and not right.

For maybe the hundredth time I thought about mornings back home with everyone hustling around doing their chores and the old cow yelling her head off for somebody to come and milk her. Calvin had taken on that chore when he was ten. Denzil fed the chickens and slopped the hogs, and Vergil hauled in wood for the stove. Even LaDonna did her part, setting out plates on the table just so, like a little five-year-old mother, while Glenna fried sausage and cut thick slices of homemade bread.

It would be warm and smoky inside the house. The dogs would come in and lie beside the stove, and everybody would be bright-eyed and laughing and telling what they'd seen outside that morning. Could be a possum sleeping in the woodpile or a fog rolling in over the hill or a deer come down to drink from the pond. It was all good news, better than what we heard on the portable radio when it was working. Then the school bus would come beeping around the bend and the boys would moan and groan and trudge off with their books and lunch buckets, unless it was planting or harvest or just time to go after squirrel.

Whenever I got to thinking like that I'd have to stop and remember it wasn't always that good.

I made myself think about the times when there was too much rain or not enough rain and the corn didn't do so good. The time

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the cow sickened and had to be put down, and Glenna cried so to see her old friend go like that. Or the time that lightning struck the big old mockernut tree and it fell on the barn and caved in the roof.

But worst of all was the time the man came in a big Chrysler car with a paper in his pocket and said he owned everything that was underneath of our land. Not he himself, but the Company he worked for and that amounted to the same thing. He showed me the paper and there was my Daddy's signature at the bottom plain as if I saw him put it there myself. My Daddy learned to sign his name after he was a grown man and many's the night I'd seen him practising to get it just right, so I'd recognize it anywhere. It was Daddy who'd insisted that I learn how to read and figure and study about the world outside our hills so when the time came I could make up my own mind whether to stay or go. But he'd never told me anything about this paper.

The Company man puffed himself up inside his sharp plaid city suit and made ready to read the paper out loud. Well, "Excuse me," I said, "I'd like to read that paper myself." I was polite and all, but I did want him to know that hillbilly though I might be, I was not ignorant.

A lot of good my pride did me, because that paper said exactly what he said it did, in amongst the whereases and the aforesaids. It said that my Daddy had sold the mineral rights under our land to the Company for $200, and the Company could come in any time they liked and take out whatever they could find there. Only they couldn't touch the cabin or the outbuildings.

"Do you understand what the paper says?" he asked, reaching for it with a soft white hand.

"Means you're planning to do a little digging," I answered. We were standing on the porch all this time, and Glenna was standing just inside the door with LaDonna hiding behind her skirt.

The Company man laughed a fat jolly ha-ha-ha and said, "That's exactly right. We've got to do a little digging and get that coal out. I'm glad you understand, sir. Saves time that way. And trouble. Now, we'll give you a chance to get your crops in before we start." He pulled another piece of paper from his pocket. "Now, let's see. We've got the shovels and the crew scheduled to start in about three weeks. Okay? See you then."

He stepped down off the porch, moving smartly for a short fat man.

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"Corn won't be ready in three weeks," I called after him.

I guess he didn't hear me. He just went straight to his big black car and got in. The car was a bit dusty on top of its polish and I wondered how many country roads he'd traveled and how many pieces of paper he'd brought into the hills and hollows. He nosed the car on up the road, and I guessed that Avery Spencer, over the hill and down the next hollow, would be in line to get some good news too. I turned to Glenna and saw the fear in her brown eyes and in her white pinched lips.

I don't know how long I was lost in remembering, but my back was starting to feel blistered. I'd been standing in front of the open oven door to soak up some heat. I'ts funny how that oven heat doesn't warm your bones. It just makes your skin hot. Nothing like the sun heat in the dream that seemed to warm from the inside out. Only that heat didn't last past waking up. Wish I could carry that dream sun inside me all through the day, walking through the gray snow and the icy puddles with the wind coming around the corners of buildings sudden-like and blasting right through my old hunting jacket.

I had a swallow of coffee left in my cup. It was pretty light in color and tasted weak. Glenna must be trying to make the coffee go farther than it's supposed to. She was clearing off the table now and the kids were putting on their jackets to go to school. At least they got the free hot lunch along with their letters. Calvin, being in junior high school, minded a lot having to line up for the free lunch tickets in full sight of all the other kids. I think if it was only for himself he wouldn't do it. Would rather go hungry. But he always managed to carry something home in his pocket, some bread or an apple, or sometimes a piece of meat wrapped up in a sheet of notebook paper.

The kids left quietly, only Calvin stopping to say, "Goodbye, Dad. 'Bye, Ma." I'd have to be leaving soon myself if I was going to pick up on any jobs that might be offered today. Glenna was washing up the breakfast bowls in cold water. She looked tired and her belly made it awkward for her at the sink. Her soft brown hair that used to be curly and bouncy hung limp on her shoulders. She said it was because she lacked rainwater to wash it with.

"I best be going now," I said.

"Yes."

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"I'll surely get something today."

"Yes."

"We can always get the welfare."

"Yes." Her dull eyes flashed for just a moment. "No. No, we can't do that."

But the sparkle had flared and was gone, and I knew it would be gone forever if we once took the welfare. It hurt my heart something fierce to see my pretty Glenna, who used to laugh and sing, who knew all the old songs and could play the zither till it brought tears of pleasure to your eyes, to see my lady-wife brought so low and downhearted. Maybe she'd perk up after the baby came.

"How are you feeling?" I asked her.

"All right. A little tired."

"Will it be soon?"

"Next week, maybe. Maybe sooner Or later. I wish. . ."

Her voice trailed off, but I knew she was wishing she didn't have to have this baby in the city hospital where the doctors raced around from one to the next and the nurses didn't have time to hold her hand and say a few words of comfort. I knew she was wishing for her own bedstead with the carved posts that she'd clung to when the pains came fast, for the granny-woman who'd caught each and every one of the other babies, for her mother and her own kind of womenfolk clustering around holding her hand and giving her encouraging words and sips of honey-sweetened ginger tea to ease her time.

"Got to go now," I said. There was no way to say anything else.

All the way down to the unemployment office I kept trying to get back inside the dream, to be walking that dirt road instead of these chilly, slopped-over, crowded city sidewalks, feeling the sun on my back instead of the eyes of the hundreds of people walking behind me or riding in cars or buses if they were lucky. Oh, I know they weren't looking at me. Like as not, they didn't even see me or know I was there. It was just that there was no peace in feeling that hurrying multitude all around me, not like the peace of country roads where a man could be alone and feel right with himself.

But the more I tried to remember the dream, the more my remembering turned to the old home and how it was when the bulldozers came. They started in on the trees first. Cut the trees down

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and blasted out the stumps. They had trucks going up and down the road hauling those logs away. It was like seeing dear friends cut down in their prime and carted away in a never-ending funeral procession.

Glenna wouldn't step foot outside the cabin once they started their chopping and blasting. She tried to keep the kids inside too. But the boys just wouldn't be kept. To Denzil and Vergil it was better than a revival meeting, but I could see Calvin turning thoughtful and silent as he watched them gouging away at the hillside.

I was no better. I'd gotten in what corn was ready for picking, but there was a lot left still in the ear that I'd never see the benefit of. But once the 'dozers and the power shovels started tearing chunks out of the land it seemed like I got paralyzed. Could do nothing but listen to the hungry grinding and wait and watch while the face of the hillside changed like the face of a beautiful woman turned haggard and old before her time by a great sorrow. The animals couldn't take it any better than we could. Both dogs disappeared one night and we never saw them again. The sow littered early and ate her farrow. The chickens ran around pecking at each other and the hens almost stopped laying entirely.

I'd seen strip-mined land once before. It was in the southern part of the state where we'd gone once to visit with some of Glenna's kin. There was a place where there'd once been a hill, covered with trees older than the oldest person around those parts. When we saw it, the shovels had finished their work and gone away. There was no sign of any hill, just blackened holes and trenches and scattered rocks like bones sticking out of a half-rotted corpse. Round and about there were heaps of earth just shoved aside with the life gone out of it. As far as we could see there was no growing thing.

The people there said that in dry weather when the wind blew, the gritty dust rose in great clouds and covered everything for miles around, and when it rained the black mud crept into the hollows smothering everything in its path. In one place there'd been a mud avalanche that covered a whole cabin, and a baby was crushed to death when the walls caved in. Those people hadn't been able to stop the shovels from coming, and now that it was all over and the land was dead, they didn't know what to do. They just hung on.

Before the shovels started in on our hillside I went to see the

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preacher, hoping he could give me some advice on how to stop them and maybe help me get together with some of the others whose land was threatened. I told him about the paper with my Daddy's signature on it, and what I'd seen of land that had been worked over by those shovels. He said I should hold fast and pray to God. He said I should render unto Caesar, and I should have faith in God and in our President to see the right thing done. He said it was possible that the Government would make the Company put everything back the way it was before. I said I didn't see how they could do that since it took a while to grow a tree.

Later on I heard that the Company had given the preacher a donation for his bible study school, but I don't know if that was true.

We hung on. We watched the shovels take huge bites out of the hill, chew them up and spit them out at the edge of the cornfield. We watched the trucks come up the road empty and go down full, and we ate their dust. The day the bulldozer flattened Glenna's kitchen garden I spoke what was on my mind.

"Glenna," I said after supper that night, "it's time to go."

"I guess so," she answered. "Where can we go?"

"I've thought about that some." I was trying to sound very calm and sensible, but truth of the matter was that I was scared by what I was going to say. "I don't see how we can start up another place, even if I knew of another place to start. We haven't got the money to buy land. Anyway, I'd just be setting on it waiting for the shovels to come over the hill and start in again."

"Then what can we do?"

I think Glenna knew what I had in mind. There wasn't much that we kept secret from each other, and although she never said much it seemed she could almost read my thoughts sometimes. I was just filling in words to keep from getting to the point.

"I'm still a young man, Glenna, and I've got my health and my strength. I can read and write and figure. But most of all I'm willing to work. And I do believe that any man, he's willing to work, can find a job to do."

"You mean we're going to the city."

"Well, yes." We were sitting at the plank table, and Glenna got up to stack the supper dishes and heat the water in the big tin dishpan.

"Oh, I fear it. I don't like it and I fear it," she whispered.

"It'll be all right, Glenna," I told her. "There are lots and lots of

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people who do okay in cities. Maybe there are some bad ones there, but so are there anywhere. And along of the bad ones I'll bet there are ten times as many good folk, helping and kind. Only we don't ever get to hear of them. And the kids'll get to go to good schools and make something of themselves and not be poor dirty farmers like their Daddy." I was telling all this to Glenna, but I was telling it to myself as well, bolstering up my plan every way I could.

"I recollect the time Acey Doolittle went to Indianapolis and had his car stolen and all his money and had to hitchhike back home."

"Aw, Glenna, he was drunk at the time and you know it."

I'd done an awful lot of talking for one time and I was afraid that any more and I'd start losing faith in my decision.

"Guess I'll go to bed now," I said. "We'll be pretty busy from tomorrow, selling off the hogs and chickens and deciding what we can carry along with us in the car."

I reached the unemployment office in record time—twenty minutes of fast walking. Running more like. Running in front of the memory of the little house in the hollow with its shutters closed up so it couldn't look out at the creeping deadness all around it, and us driving away in the old Chevy with every mortal thing we could carry packed inside and tied on top. Now the old Chevy sat out in the street with its wheels gone and its seats and engine gone and all the glass smashed out. Nobody even wanted to haul its carcass away for junk.

I gave in my name to the lady at the front desk. She ought to know it by heart by this time since she heard it darn near every morning. But somehow she never seemed to remember. I knew her name all right. She had it on a little metal plate on her desk. Miss I. Fonseca. She had stiff bright yellow hair and blue on her eyelids and a lot of red lipstick on her mouth. Her voice was hard and loud, but more than that it was disconnected some way, as if the things she had to say had nothing to do with Miss I. Fonseca.

I went and found a plastic chair to sit on and wait and the back section of a newspaper to read while I was waiting. I was about halfway through the Help Wanted ads, wondering how on earth I was ever going to get the experience that everybody seemed to want even for a job of janitoring, when Miss I. Fonseca called my name.

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"Mr. Powell will see you now," she said in that loud and distant way of hers.

I'd seen Mr. Powell before and he'd given me a few jobs of casual labor over the months. I never thought to see the day when I would be beholden to a colored man for a job of work. But Mr. Powell was kind and polite and seemed to understand the hardships of a country person in the city. He told me once that his own people had come up from the South years ago when he was a kid, so I guess he remembered the way of it.

I walked over to his cubicle lined around with green metal walls halfway up and frosted glass the rest of the way.

"Morning, Mr. Mayhew," he said. "Have a seat. How's it going?"

"Morning, sir. Okay, I guess." I set down and waited.

He shuffled through a stack of cards on his desk and pulled one out.

"It says here on your card that you can read and write and do arithmetic."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I just had a call from Mossbacker's Warehouse. Seems a forklift tipped over and landed on their checker. They need a replacement right away. Think you can handle it?"

"Yes, sir." I had no notion of what a checker was supposed to do, but I wasn't about to tell that to Mr. Powell, decent as he was.

"It's easy work," he said. "All you have to do is mark off on a check list whatever goes in or comes out of the warehouse and add it up at the end. And if you work out all right, the job might last until the regular man gets out of the hospital. If you get over there right away you'll be able to get in a good seven hours. Here's the address." He scribbled on a slip of paper. "And the directions how to get there."

I stood up. "Thank you, Mr. Powell. I'll sure do my best." He held out his hand and I took it. I'd never shaken the hand of a colored man before, but this was a man who was helping me to stand tall and not looking down on me for a dumb redneck. Sometimes the old ways of thinking and doing need to be shook up a little. I turned to leave.

"Ah. . .Mr. Mayhew. . ."

I turned back in the doorway.

"The warehouse is about three miles from here. Have you got bus fare?"

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I hesitated, then started to say "yes" although all I had was enough to buy a cup of coffee for my lunch, and that wasn't enough for bus fare. But before I could say anything, Mr. Powell was around his desk and pressing some coins into my hand.

"It's just a loan. You can pay me back." He clapped me on the shoulder. "Good luck. I'll call and tell them you're on the way."

I ran out of the unemployment office and all the way to the bus stop, no room in my head or my heart now for memories. I was a man with a job of work to do and impatient to get at it and prove myself. The bus came within a few minutes and I took that as a good omen. I was on my way. We'd be all right now.

I scarcely noticed the dreary city landscape as the bus rolled along. I kept thinking of all the things we needed and how we could get some of them in just a few hours. We could all go down to the store after I got home from work and have a good time deciding what we needed most. Maybe I could keep enough back for a little present for Glenna, a growing plant or a shiny hair clip, something to cheer her up. Before I finished thinking about all the ham hocks and beans we'd be able to buy, the bus reached my stop and I jumped off happy as a kid diving off a barn rafter into a pile of hay.

The job was easy, just like Mr. Powell said. But it was cold. I stood out on the loading dock all morning checking in a shipment of automobile parts. The crates were all marked with what was inside them, and all I had to do was find the right place on the check list and make a mark against it. Then the forklift went on inside the warehouse.

I worked slowly at first, to be sure I got everything right, but I soon got the hang of it and speeded up. My hands got numb but I tried not to let that slow me down. I would have worked right through lunchtime, but everybody else knocked off so there was nothing for me to check. A canteen wagon came around and I borrowed fifty cents against my day's pay and bought some hot soup and coffee.

We all sat around an oil stove just inside the warehouse and warmed ourselves against the afternoon's work. There were about eight other men working there. I didn't say very much, just made myself known, and listened while they discussed the accident that had brought me such good luck. The regular checker had suffered two broken ribs and a dislocated shoulder. No one knew when

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he'd be able to come back to work. I was sorry for his pain, but grateful for my chance to work a few days and get some of that experience I didn't seem to have.

We finished unloading the automobile parts during the afternoon and started working on an outgoing shipment of machine tools. Five o'clock came and I was ready to go on working all night if need be, but I went to the office and collected my day's pay, less the fifty cents lunch money. The boss asked me if I could come back next day and I said that wild horses couldn't keep me away if he wanted me there He laughed and said I was a good worker all right, and he'd see me in the morning.

With $13.50 in my pocket I felt like a millionaire. Even so, I decided to walk home because the bus fare would just buy a quart of milk for the kids. I walked back along the bus route, looking in the shop windows along the way. I came to a dime store and went into its bright lights and warm thick popcorn-and-candy smell They had some plants way in the back of the store, but they looked so sad and droopy it would only make Glenna more downhearted to set eyes on one of them. I could have got her a goldfish in a bowl for ninety-nine cents, but I was afraid it would freeze to death before I got it home. So I settled for a bright green plastic hair barrette with yellow daisies on it for forty-nine cents plus tax.

I practically ran the rest of the way and was on our block before it really got dark. I passed the old Chevy where it sat ringed round with street filth and gray slush. Some kids were jumping on top of it. The rear license plate was gone and I thought that was a good thing so nobody could find out it was mine and give me parking tickets. The front plate, the one that said *West Virginia – Almost Heaven*, was still in place. I guess nobody wanted that, or believed it was true.

The hallway was dark, as always. The super hardly ever bothered to put new light bulbs in. They always got stolen after a few days. But I knew my way by feel and by smell. There were always the same number of steps going up and coming down, and I ran up those four flights and around those dark landings like I was running up to Salvation Johnny's camp meeting to be saved. I couldn't wait to lay my day's earnings before Glenna and tell her that I might be working steady for a while.

The door of the apartment was locked and I was glad of that. Glenna often forgot to keep the door locked. We'd never had a

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lock on the door back home. In the city it was best to keep your door locked. I banged on the door and yelled for her to open up. There was no sound from inside. I thought maybe she and the kids had gone out or maybe her time had come and they'd all gone to the hospital. I got out my key and unlocked the door.

It was dark in the apartment, but what came out at me and almost bowled me over was the smell. The gas smell came billowing out of there into my face like a suffocating demon. I must have yelled because I got a lungful of it that made me dizzy. I know that I reached inside the door and flicked on the overhead light. I know that I ran into the kitchen and threw a chair at the window.

After that things are a little mixed up, but I know what I saw. I saw my old shotgun lying on the kitchen table with a piece of paper propped up against it. I saw Glenna setting on a kitchen chair with her head lying on the open oven door. LaDonna was lying at her feet. I think I turned the gas off then.

I went into the next room where the kids slept and I saw Denzil and Vergil clutching at each other on the floor in a corner, and the dried blood on their faces. I saw where Calvin had tried to crawl out of the room in spite of the terrible wound in his chest and hadn't been able to make it. I went back to the kitchen.

Cold air was coming in the broken window. The gas smell was less, but I was still dizzy and there was a distant clanging sound in my head. I felt like I was moving through thick layers of clutching invisible fog. I raised Glenna up. Her face was so flushed she looked like she had a terrible consuming fever. But when I put my lips on her forehead she was cold. I laid her head back down.

I remembered the piece of paper on the table. I went over and picked it up. It was a piece of Calvin's notebook paper. I felt it in my hands, the dry rustle of it, and I smelled the schoolroom smell of it, but it was a long time before I could bring myself to read it. It was written in pencil, in Glenna's careful schoolgirl handwriting, all the letters formed as though the teacher were standing over her with a paddle ready to swat if she did it wrong.

It said, "I can't bear to birth my baby in this place. I'm going Home, and I'm taking the children with me. Sweet Jesus forgive me." That was all.

I put the paper back on the table and I went over and closed the apartment door. And locked it. I went and picked Glenna up

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off the chair and carried her into the bedroom. She was heavy, but I made it all right. I laid her on the mattress, straight and neat. Then I put each of the children in their own beds and covered them up. I cleaned the shotgun as best I could and put it away. And then I went to bed.

I lay down beside Glenna and pulled the quilt over both of us. I closed my eyes, and the dream came right away. I was standing in the dirt road, but this time I had my shotgun in my hand. I sat in the grassy place, and when the squirrels started carrying on I was ready for them, and I got five. I tied them together and hung them over my gun barrel. When I got to the huckleberry bush I laid the gun and the squirrels in the road, and picked my hat full of berries.

I went on up the road and at the bend I could already smell wood smoke and hear the kids shouting and laughing. I rounded the bend and it was all just as I knew it would be. I left the squirrels on the porch and took the berries inside to Glenna. She was setting in her old rocker nursing a tiny new girl baby. Calvin helped me skin the squirrels, and Denzil and Vergil each begged for a tail to hang on their belts. Everything was the way it was supposed to be.

But sometimes, after I go to bed in that cabin in the hollow, after the kids are all quietened down, and maybe Glenna's sitting up late doing some mending, sometimes when I go to sleep I'll have a dream of people trying to talk to me, of being in ice cold water up to my neck, of being struck by lightning and the shock of it passing through my whole body. But it's never very real It's not a real place and nothing you could even call a nightmare And it doesn't happen very often, just once in a while.

Life just goes on in that cabin in the woods. The seasons come and go. The trees stand tall. Glenna grows her runner beans and her squash and tomatoes. The boys and I go hunting, and the girls will learn to make butter and bake bread. And somehow I know that no power shovel is ever going to come over this hill

"Q"

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a *NEW* Miss Phipps story by

PHYLLIS BENTLEY

One of the curses of fictional detectives, both male and female, is that they can't go anywhere, see anything, do anything—even the most innocent everyday things—without becoming involved with crime, from misdemeanor to murder. You'd swear a fictional detective shouldn't even brush his or her teeth in the morning! As for taking a walk—it's fraught with peril!

Miss Marian Phipps, the spinster-sleuth, is no exception. Here she is just having her picture taken by the local photographer, while visiting her niece in Hudley, and look what it leads to . . .

MISS PHIPPS MEETS A DOG

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

"Could we have a smile, please? Please?" said the photographer.

Miss Phipps smiled.

The photographer shuddered.

"Not like that," he pleaded.

Miss Phipps relaxed.

Lights were moved, umbrellas swung.

"You're looking rather somber, madam," murmured the photographer wistfully.

"Couldn't you give me something to look at that would warm my heart?" urged Miss Phipps.

The photographer hastily proffered a bound album containing specimens of his work arranged in slots, all neatly named and dated. Miss Phipps riffled the pages. Naked babes sprawled on fur rugs; young persons wearing graduation robes smirked happily; women in middle life tried to smooth out their frowns while their husbands seemed to be wondering about the efficacy of their razors. Miss Phipps groaned.

"I wish I loved the Human Race, I wish I loved its silly face," she murmured to herself.

Of course she knew she was

1974 by Phyllis Bentley.

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in a bad mood. A hundred yards away, down the country lane where her niece Anne lived—where Miss Phipps was staying for two weeks—there had been a brutal murder. Just ten days ago old Mrs. Jenkins—the kindest, sweetest soul, plump, widowed, white-haired, an old-age pensioner, dearly loved by children and grandchildren—had been found battered to death inside the doorway of her attractive cottage, a little Seventeenth Century building which stood alone.

The milkman's lad, opening the door on Monday morning to receive his weekly payment, had found her lying there. He ran shrieking to the nearest house. As it chanced, Miss Phipps was there alone; the children had gone to school, their father and mother to work.

Miss Phipps had accompanied the young man to the cottage. Mrs. Jenkins, who was still wearing the checked coat and fur bonnet in which she had attended a chapel whist drive on Saturday night, was not an agreeable sight; the battering had been heavy. The cottage had been ransacked, closets and drawers emptied, Mrs. Jenkins' handbag torn apart. Her family, however, after having been notified by the police whom Miss Phipps had summoned, surmised that the thief could not have found more than £10—if that—in the cottage.

"Mother never kept much money in the house," said her daughter, weeping. "Of course she'd have her pension, you know."

"Was anything else taken?"

"Only my father's tobacco jar. It was of no value, small but very heavy, made of lead I always thought. It came from Germany. I'm sorry it's gone. My father was always very fond of it, as a curiosity and a wartime relic, you know. I've passed it to him many a time to fill his pipe. I care for it on his account. But it has no value. Nothing of value taken except a few pound notes."

Miss Phipps was furious. That some disgusting lout should batter a harmless old woman for a few pounds! But what made her rage, and suffer the torture of guilt, was that the thief was probably seeking her niece's house, where more money was likely to be found.

It was now Monday afternoon, ten days after the crime, but police inquiries, in which Miss Phipps and the milkman's lad naturally played a considerable part, had kept memory all too clear, and her anger still seethed.

"Disgusting," fumed Miss

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Phipps to herself. "How can people do such things?"

The clothes worn in the photographs, obviously their owners' best, seemed an insult to that poor harmless hard-working old woman—well! She turned the last page of Mr. Fitwell's album. A photograph lay loosely inside the back cover, not as yet fitted into a slot.

"Oh, what a lovely dog!" exclaimed Miss Phipps. "What a beautiful animal!"

The camera clicked.

"What a wonderful photograph, Mr. Fitwell," said Miss Phipps admiringly.

Mr. Fitwell, rejoiced as all artists are by appreciation of his work, left his camera and hurried to her side.

"How did you manage to make him keep the pose? Goldie, I mean," said Miss Phipps, reading the letters on the dog's collar.

"Only a snapshot," boasted Mr. Fitwell, gazing with pleasure at his picture. He proceeded to give details of the special small camera with which he had taken it. Miss Phipps was barely listening.

"Really! It's very fine. Pity it's not in color. What color was his fur, by the way?"

"Gold shading into cream."

"Lovely. What a noble head. Lifted at a fine angle. So smooth and sleek. Eyes full of kindness and affection. Friendly. Long well-brushed coat."

"He was just sitting on the moor, waiting for his master."

The moor, a considerable open stretch, once filled by heather and gorse, but now civilized into grass where juvenile football and cricket teams played, was the gift of a long-ago landlord of the peerage, and bore his name, Mountlace. It was a notable feature of the Hudley landscape, and Miss Phipps knew it well.

"I hope his owner was worthy of him."

"I didn't see his owner."

"A *big* dog, I hope," suggested Miss Phipps.

"Oh, yes. A golden retriever, I think."

"I know nothing of dogs' breeds, I fear," admitted Miss Phipps. "But I would like to have a print of this noble animal."

"You shall certainly have one."

"Well, I suppose we must resume our task," said Miss Phipps.

She sighed, but Goldie's fine image had made her shed some of her bad temper.

"I don't think we need take any more. We have just the expression I wanted."

"Oh. Well. If you are satis-

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fied," began Miss Phipps, rather taken aback.

"I am *honored* to have had the opportunity—that you should give me a sitting although you live in London amongst so many great masters of my art is a great privilege, a source of great gratification to me," panted the photographer.

"Your pictures of my niece's two youngest were very pleasing," explained Miss Phipps. She gave her London address and discussed how soon she would receive the prints. Mr. Fitwell gave her his business card, elegantly printed in purple. "What kind of tail had he? The picture doesn't show it."

"A plume—a noble plume."

A nice man, thought Miss Phipps, making farewell noises.

Two weeks later Miss Phipps, back in London, was walking in a park, observing with pleasure the ducks swimming on a pond.

"Ducks are always somehow a trifle comic," she said to herself, smiling. "I don't know why, I'm sure. A little fussy, perhaps; rather small for their speed. Self-important. Very competent, of course, and lovable. Colors nicely variegated and well designed. But their necks are rather out of scale.

"Now swans! No swan could be comic. Human beings have inequalities the same as ducks. And what can we do about it? I should have tried to arrange things differently if I had been in charge, I think. But then every creature would have resembled every other creature and that would have been terribly dull. Perhaps we're better off the way we are."

Musing thus, she strayed off the broad avenue into a narrow side path, sat down on a secluded seat, and continued to meditate on the universe. A few adults passed by, but they were silent and did not break her thoughts. A large dog strayed mildly through the bushes, sniffed at a branch or two, lifted a leg, and then came forward.

"Goldie!" exclaimed Miss Phipps with delight.

For the dog was indeed a golden retriever.

Miss Phipps felt pleased with herself because she had recognized and remembered this.

"Goldie," she said again in a summoning tone.

The dog advanced, halted, and slightly wagged its tail, as if recognizing its name. Miss Phipps put out a tentative hand and stroked its beautiful head. The dog appeared to like this, came close, and laid its head on Miss Phipps's knee.

"Well, Goldie, dear! How nice to see you!" said Miss Phipps, stroking the dog's head with more confidence. For he was

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the Goldie whose photograph she had seen in the studio of Mr. Fitwell. He beamed up at her, and Miss Phipps loved him.

A man came round the bend in the path.

At first sight Miss Phipps did not much like the look of him. He was short and squat, dark, broad-shouldered, well dressed in the trendy fashion of the times with flared black trousers, yellow cardigan, black beads, and a rather handsome short black-suede coat. She could not see much of his face, for it was plentifully shaded by black hair—beard, sideburns, black lock over his forehead.

"I shall never like these woolly-faced men," grumbled Miss Phipps. She rebuked herself, however. "Fortunately, I'm too old to be required to do so. After all," she continued, "he can't help being a duck and not a swan, any more than I can."

The dark man approached. He had not hat or cap to lift, of course—scarcely any man wore headgear nowadays, it seemed—but his manner was polite as he said, "You like my dog?"

"I've seen him before," explained Miss Phipps. "That is, I've seen a picture of him. In a Hudley photographer's album. Mr. Fitwell showed it to me. Goldie, Mountlace Moor, January tenth, 1974. I recognized him at once. A noble animal!"

"Yes, indeed," said Goldie's master.

Miss Phipps opened her eyes. At first her surroundings appeared blurred, wavering and uncertain.

"Where am I?" she murmured feebly.

Her environment began now to stabilize itself, to take on shapes and colors. She gazed around her in astonishment. She was not covered by her own elegant blue and pink *duvet,* but by a coldly white counterpane of an unfriendly official kind. The bed had a metal railing at its foot. Distant windows were of the sash kind that open top and bottom.

Her upper left arm was in a plaster cast, her left collarbone bandaged. Her head, also bandaged, was sharply painful, and when she moved, however carefully, it hurt even more. Turning her eyes to one side, she perceived sitting at her bedside a neat, young, rather handsome girl in her twenties, clad in navy blue with silver buttons.

"Where am I?" repeated Miss Phipps, her tone now rather peevish.

"You're coming to yourself now, dear," said Miss Bluecoat, as Miss Phipps at once dubbed

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her. "You're going to be all right."

"That's what they always say to the heroine on films, just before she dies," reflected Miss Phipps. "Where am I?" she demanded crossly.

"Nurse!" called Miss Bluecoat.

A pretty girl in a charming pink uniform with white accessories floated into view.

Their uniforms are much more becoming nowadays, thought Miss Phipps.

"You're in a private cubicle in the intensive care ward in Drivington Hospital," said the nurse.

"Oh. Where is Drivington?"

"North East London."

"What is the matter with me?"

"You were probably attacked by a large dog."

"Oh, no! Not by a dog."

"One of the park wardens found you lying with your head against the leg of an iron seat. A police ambulance brought you in."

"Well, well."

A mature stern-faced nurse, also in dark navy blue, came in.

The Ward Sister, no doubt, decided Miss Phipps.

"There's no need to worry," said Sister firmly. "You've broken your left arm, but it's only a simple fracture. Your collarbone was out of joint, but it has been replaced. Your head was frankly rather more troublesome. But none of your injuries is serious."

"Good-o," said Miss Phipps with some sarcasm.

"I think a cup of tea now, Nurse."

"Yes, Sister."

"The police want to interview you, of course. But they're not to bother you till you've had a good sleep. Would you feel equal to telling us your name?"

"My driving license is in my bag," said Miss Phipps feebly.

"I am afraid the contents of your handbag were missing, dear," said Miss Bluecoat.

"You mean I was attacked and my handbag stolen?"

"Yes, ransacked. It looked like a mugging, as they call it," said Miss Bluecoat cheerfully.

"The handbag, empty and torn, was found some distance away, beneath some bushes," Sister added.

"Goldie's master. Well, he didn't get much. But why should he have attacked me?" wondered Miss Phipps.

"Perhaps you were wearing rather a handsome coat and looked rich," said the young nurse.

"I don't think so." Miss Phipps felt weary.

"Tea, Nurse," said Sister sharply.

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Tea was brought. Miss Phipps was raised by skillful arms and propped by pillows. She sipped gladly, but unfortunately immediately threw up. She lay down to recover. After a little while a doctor came in, a pleasant young man in his thirties, she thought.

"I'm sorry," apologized Miss Phipps.

"Not to worry. Merely the result of the anesthetic," he said.

"I was not wearing my new coat," affirmed Miss Phipps feebly.

"Good. Then it is not spoiled," he said cheerfully.

"But why did the man attack me?"

"You were seen earlier in company with a dog," put in Miss Bluecoat.

"Goldie was the kindest, noblest dog," said Miss Phipps. "I stroked him—he liked me—I'm sure he would never have attacked me."

"It's true you had no signs of bites," said the doctor.

"I told you so. There is an element of coincidence in these events which distresses me," murmured Miss Phipps. "I would never use it in a story."

"Story? Do you write stories?" inquired the doctor.

"I do. Detective stories," confessed Miss Phipps.

"Do tell me your name," pleaded the doctor. "I may have read some of your stories."

Miss Phipps was all too familiar with the fact, well known to many authors, that nobody she met had ever actually read her stories—and yet some people must read them, for they sold. But in any case she could never cease to hope that someday she would meet one reader. As usual she did not resist the temptation.

"Marian Phipps," she said. Seeing all her hearers' faces go blank, as usual, she went on to give her London address.

"Nearest relative?" inquired Miss Bluecoat, who had drawn out a notebook.

Miss Phipps gave the name and address of her niece Anne in Hudley. It was when she reached the words "Glendale Road" that she suddenly shot up in bed and shouted.

"He's in danger! Notify the Hudley police!"

"No need to get excited, dear," said Sister, pushing her gently among the pillows.

Miss Phipps shot up again.

"No, listen! Please listen! Or telephone Inspector John Tarrant! No, he's a Superintendent now. Superintendent Tarrant, in Brittlesea."

"A friend?"

"I have worked with him. *He'll* believe me. Poor Mr. Fitwell is in danger!"

"Who is Mr. Fitwell?"

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"The photographer who took a snapshot of Goldie on Mountlace Moor in Hudley and dated it January tenth. His business card was in my handbag. Goldie's master now has that card—at least, we must assume so. He knows the address of Mr. Fitwell—the place that has the dated portrait of Goldie."

"How did he know that?"

"Idiot that I was, I told him," said Miss Phipps.

"But why should that trouble him?"

"If Goldie was in Hudley, probably his master was there too."

"Well, yes, perhaps. But why—"

"A brutal murder was committed in Hudley on the night of January tenth," said Miss Phipps, staccato.

"He can't be charged with murder on such evidence," said the doctor.

"Of course not. Plant police on Mr. Fitwell's premises, and if Goldie's master turns up, charge him with breaking and entering."

"We don't know who he is."

"If the Hudley police catch him playing the burglar, they'll know."

"To capture and charge him like that won't do much good."

"Oh, yes, it will. He can't murder any more old ladies while he's in prison—or attack me," said Miss Phipps, whose head suddenly began to hurt.

"Just take these," urged the doctor, handing her two pills.

It seemed that Miss Phipps had swallowed the pills and was about to fall asleep. While still in a drowsy state, however, it seemed to her she vaguely saw a large blue police figure and heard telephone conversations.

She slept.

"How are you feeling now, Aunt Marian?" said a kind, familiar voice.

"Not too bad," lied Miss Phipps gamely. "What are you doing here, Mary?" She had recognized Mary Tarrant's voice.

"We came up to see you, of course. John's gone back to Brittlesea, but I've been staying in London for several days. I've phoned your niece Anne in Hudley every night."

"Does your husband—he's a Superintendent now, isn't he?—does he understand about dear Goldie, and the picture, and the date?"

"Yes, he understands everything. There have been further developments."

"Oh."

"Yes. It seems there are three brothers in that family. One still lives in Hudley, two live in London. Arthur is the one in

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Hudley, Bernard and Chester have a house in Drivington. Arthur sent word to Bernard, we guess, that he knew a house where there might be good pickings."

"That was my niece's house, I fear."

"Yes. With her husband's position, you know."

"Poor Mrs. Jenkins. What a shame! Did the Hudley police capture Bernard breaking and entering Mr. Fitwell's studio?"

"They certainly did. They got a warrant to search Arthur's flat, and also the Drivington place, and there they found Mr. Jenkins' little German tobacco jar."

"Conclusive evidence for the murder."

"Well, near enough, we hope, for it shows traces of blood on it as if it had been used as a weapon. Heavy, you know. Of course, the blood didn't show to the naked eye, but science can do wonderful things nowadays. Bernard is now in prison."

"What will happen to him if he's convicted?"

"Twenty years, I expect."

Miss Phipps moved her head on the pillow. It no longer hurt.

"Mary," she said firmly, "I must see Bernard."

"Nonsense, Aunt Marian. It's quite impossible. John would never allow it."

Miss Phipps, who like everybody else disliked having her compliance taken for granted, suppressed the annoyance she felt and said mildly, "But what about Goldie, that lovely dog?"

"Brother Chester has already sent him off to the local branch of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals," Mary said.

"Horrid fellow. I shall adopt Goldie."

"Nonsense. It's not right to keep a large dog in a small London flat like yours."

"My niece in Hudley will take him."

"Why not put up a notice-board pointing to your niece's house so that Arthur can read it and break in there? Goldie would be as good as a signpost."

"I should trust the police to protect her."

"One more job for them to do," said Mary.

"We'll go and see Goldie at the R.S.P.C.A."

"We?"

"You and I, Mary."

"Well, he *is* a lovely dog, Aunt Marian."

"It's good for children to be brought up with an animal they love."

"Well—"

Goldie now enjoys scampering along the sandy shore at Brittlesea.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 414th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. . .the story of Mary Lou Fremont and what she found on the kitchen floor. . .

The author, Jane Beckman, has served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in West Africa. At present she is devoting most of her time to writing.

Her hobbies include interior decorating and furniture refinishing. She has a deep interest in Indo-Islamic architecture and Indian miniature painting, an interest born during the two years she lived in India.

"My burning ambition," she has informed us, "is to write mystery stories." Now that the ambition is aflame, why not write some stories of crime and detection set in West Africa or India?. . .

HERE COMES THE BRIDE

by JANE BECKMAN

I can't remember how many times since I got my driver's license at the age of 16 I've parked the car in the driveway, entered through the front door of my family's modest ranch-style house, hurried to the kitchen where I tossed my purse on the round oak table, and opened the refrigerator for a glass of water or a Coke or an apple.

That is exactly what I did that Monday afternoon, except I couldn't open the refrigerator door because stretched out on the floor directly in front of it was the body of a man. He was young, wore grimy blue jeans and a faded plaid shirt, and his hair was a greasy mop of reddish brown. He needed a bath. He also needed someone to remove the knife that was sticking in his back.

I have never gone queasy at the sight of blood, or squealed in a scary movie, but the sight

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of that body set my knees trembling, and for a moment I thought I was going to faint. I didn't. Instead I grabbed the yellow wall phone from its hook and dialed the Sheriff's office. I recognized the gravelly twang that answered as that of Sheriff Hudler.

"This is Mary Lou Fremont," I said somewhat frantically. "I just came home and there is a dead man with a knife in his back on the floor of our kitchen. . .No, I don't know who he is. I've never seen him before."

The Sheriff promised to come over immediately. I hung up the phone and sank into a kitchen chair, the one farthest away from the body, and waited until he arrived.

A mysterious murder is rare in our little Southwestern town, and the Sheriff seemed a little ill at ease—in fact, he seemed almost annoyed at having been called in to deal with one. He arrived, a stocky, balding, perspiring little man, and gritted his teeth as he squatted down to examine the body.

"Never saw him before myself," he said. "Don't think he's from around here." He turned his attention to the knife. "Did you ever see that knife before? Looks like a paring knife."

"It's ours, I think. I cut a fresh peach with one like it for lunch, and I left it on the kitchen counter. It isn't there now."

The Sheriff looked at the body and then around the kitchen. He reminded me of a doctor doing an examination. And when he finished, he imparted about as much information of his findings as most doctors I've consulted. All he said as we left the kitchen and went into the living room was, "No identification or money of any kind. Looks like somebody cleaned out his pockets. I've put in a call to the State Crime Bureau at Rockton. Shouldn't take more than forty-five minutes for their investigator to get here. In the meantime I'm afraid we are going to have to leave that body where it is."

I told him I understood.

"And," he said, "I think you better sit down. You're looking kind of pale."

I sat down on the sofa. It had been fiercely hot all August, but for the first time in days I felt cool. I almost wished for a sweater to put on over the knit pullover I wore with my slacks.

"He doesn't look like he's been dead very long. What time did you find him?" asked the Sheriff.

"Not more than two minutes before I called you. I'm afraid I

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was upset and didn't look at the clock."

"It was twenty minutes to three when you called. Had you just come in the house?"

"Yes."

"How long had you been gone?"

"More than an hour, I think. Mother and Dad had to go to Enid today—to the funeral of a man my father served with in the war. And Grandmother decided to go with them. My brother is working down in Texas this summer. So I was here by myself. I ate lunch, and then sometime after one, about one fifteen, I think, I went down to the new house to do some unpacking and arranging." I paused, then asked, "You know that Calvin Franklin and I are getting married on Saturday? We've bought a new house that has been built just outside of town."

"Matter of fact, I did know about the wedding. My wife already told me I've got to put on my Sunday suit to go. I've known Cal all his life, and you, too, I guess. At least, I've known your mom and dad and grandmother. Not the best time for saying it, but congratulations anyway. Cal's getting a mighty pretty little wife to help spend that Franklin money."

He pulled a cigar from his pocket and started to light it. "I don't suppose you locked the house when you left?"

"No, we never do unless we're going to be away overnight."

"People in this town never lock doors." He shook his head. "Both front and back doors unlocked?"

"Yes."

"When you left to go to the other house, did you notice this fellow or anyone else hanging around in the neighborhood?"

"No," I thought hard. "No, I don't remember seeing anyone outside except Mr. Martindale mowing the lawn at the Funeral Home. It's awfully hot today. And not too many people are out in the middle of the day when the weather's like this."

It would have been nice if I could have offered the Sheriff a glass of iced tea while we waited for Mr. Crowell, the investigator from the Crime Bureau. But the ice was in the refrigerator, and we couldn't open the door without moving the body.

When the Sheriff ran out of questions, he changed the subject to the coming wedding. At one point he said, "Cal used to date my niece Sara, did you know that?"

I said I did. But I didn't add that I knew Cal had broken up with Sara when he became engaged to me.

"You and Cal haven't been

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going together very long, have you?" he asked.

"No, it hasn't been long," I admitted. "After I finished college, I went out to California and worked in a lawyer's office for a year. I came back here at Easter to visit my family, and I ran into Cal downtown. Four days later we were engaged." I laughed. Somehow the speed of our courtship seemed funny in retrospect. "I went back to California to continue working until I could train another girl to take my place. At the end of June I came back to get ready for the wedding."

At that moment we heard Mr. Crowell's car pull into the driveway, and I went to the door to meet him. He looked to me more like an extra in a Western movie than a detective.

He brought with him several cases fitted with equipment and he set to work with a semblance of proficiency. I stood in the doorway of the kitchen and watched. I felt a strong desire to turn away from the grim procedure, yet I could not force myself back to the living room.

Eventually he finished, and the body was taken away. By that time my mother and father and grandmother had returned. Mr. Crowell asked much the same questions as the Sheriff had. At one point Grandmother startled us with a declaration she had seen the body before. But she went on to explain, "If you've seen one hippie, you've seen them all—except this one looks better than most because he's dead." But all of us stated with equal certainty that we had never seen the dead young man before and had no idea why anyone would be murdered in our kitchen.

The excitement added to the heat ruined the appetites of the whole family. Finally about 8:30 we decided on a salad and some sandwiches, and I said I would heat a can of pork and beans. At our house we don't consider them edible unless some ketchup, brown sugar, chopped onion, salt, and pepper have been added.

My crotchety, gray-haired little grandmother had the refrigerator door open as I added the last ingredient and tasted the mixture. "Needs more salt."

"Well, Mary Lou, you might get enough salt in something if you didn't keep it way over here in the refrigerator."

"The salt's here over the stove, Grandmother," I said.

"No, it's not. It's right here in the shelf in the door."

I went to the refrigerator to see. Grandmother handed me a green and white container with the label printed in English on one side and Spanish on the other.

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"Funny, I never saw this salt before. Maybe Mother bought it."

"Maybe so," said Grandmother.

"I wonder if it's good after being in the refrigerator. Salt doesn't spoil, does it?" I opened the container. It wasn't salt. I reached for the phone and called Sheriff Hudler. He came over immediately.

The Sheriff also examined the contents of the container. "Think you might be right, Mary Lou," he said. "We have to have one of Crowell's experts in the city make it official, but I think we've found ourselves some drugs. Marijuana, if you ask me."

Crowell was called at the motel where he was staying. Everyone was sure the salt container had not been in the refrigerator before the dead man was found in the kitchen. And the only clear fingerprints they were able to get from the container were mine and Grandmother's.

We found the body and the salt container on Monday. I don't remember Tuesday very well except Mr. Crowell came back and asked a lot more questions, and I spent over an hour enduring the final fitting of my wedding dress.

Early on Wednesday morning Mr. Crowell called from the Sheriff's office and said they had talked with all the neighbors. No one had seen the dead man or anyone else enter or leave our house. And he asked us to make sure nothing in the house was missing. I groaned. What complicated matters was the more than 75 wedding gifts, most of them displayed on tables set up in the family room. I had made a list of the gifts, but checking would be a mammoth job, and there were so many other things that had to be done before Saturday.

For once I was glad I was getting such a strait-laced, pious mother-in-law. It was her regular every-other-Wednesday-morning missionary study group that came to the rescue and dispensed with a lesson on the efforts to win souls in Central Burundi in order to check if anyone, while sticking our best paring knife in the back of a hippie, had snatched a sterling teaspoon or a lime-green luncheon cloth. The verdict reached early that hot afternoon was that the only thing missing was a stainless-steel butter dish, which undoubtedly had been thrown out with all the wrapping paper.

I think if Calvin hadn't been so busy helping his father organize the work on their farm so it would run smoothly without him while we took our

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honeymoon, he would have liked to help Mr. Crowell in his investigation. On Wednesday evening Calvin came to the house, and we sat out in the yard. He leaned back in the lawn chair and stretched his long legs out in front of him. His freckled brow wrinkled in thought. Watching him I decided he resembled an undernourished sociology professor more than a farm boy.

"Whoever killed that guy either got into your house right before you left or just after you left," he said. "Are you sure you didn't hear any creaking boards while you were eating lunch, or that you didn't see any strange cars parked anywhere when you went down to the new house?"

"Positive," I said. "I didn't hear any boards creak, and the only cars I remember seeing were that old gray jalopy of Mr. Ketchum's and Marty Robinson's new sports car—parked in front of Carol Cleaver's, by the way—and Kenny Bailey's blue-and-white convertible."

"Kenny Bailey doesn't drive a blue-and-white convertible."

"Yes, he does. I remember he bought it right before I went to California."

"He traded that in three months ago. There's not a blue-and-white convertible in town."

"Well, there was on Monday afternoon, and it was parked around the corner on Weaver Street when I went down to our new house."

We called Mr. Crowell.

That a stranger had been killed in the kitchen of the family of the bride-to-be was decided by all concerned to be an unfortunate occurrence, and an additional complication at a very busy time; but it was no reason to postpone the wedding.

Late on Friday afternoon, as I was about to change for the final rehearsal, Mr. Crowell stopped by the house.

"Just thought you'd like to know we've identified the guy who was killed in your kitchen," he said. "His name was Jimmy Anderson. James Robert Bartholomew Anderson, to be exact. His dad's a big stockbroker in Boston. I just talked with the father on the phone this afternoon when he called about having the body shipped back East.

"The kid dropped out of college a couple of years ago and disappeared. We found a record of a couple of recent arrests for possession of narcotics in Los Angeles. Looked like he was doing some pushing of the stuff too.

"We think Anderson must have been working with one of the dope-smuggling operations.

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They bring the stuff up through here from Mexico. Of course, the question is, if a couple of dope smugglers are passing through town, why does one of them get killed in the Fremonts' kitchen?"

"Do you have any idea on that?" I asked.

"I sure do," he grinned. "And I'm real proud of my theory. I think Anderson and somebody else was in that blue-and-white convertible—which we've never been able to trace, by the way—and I think they started having an argument. They pulled off the highway and stopped on that shady street to finish it. Now it was a hundred and three degrees at one o'clock that afternoon. They might have been sitting behind those trees along that street and you would never have noticed them. I think they saw you leave and they simply came in for nothing more than a drink of cold water—and a place where the other one could kill Anderson without any witnesses."

"I see," I said.

"What I can't figure out," he said, taking his hat in his hand and starting toward the front door, "is why that salt container was left in the refrigerator in the first place, and if it was left, why it was only one-third full of marijuana instead of a full package of heroin." He shrugged. "Maybe whoever did it was under the influence of some of that dope and not thinking clearly."

He said goodbye, wished Calvin and me the best, and went out the door.

From the back of the church I watched the first bridesmaid in her long blue gown, carrying her bouquet of daisies, start down the aisle. That dirty Jimmy Anderson was going to spoil all this. Hitchhiked in from California and showed up at the door just as I was ready to go out to the new house.

To blackmail me. That was what he was going to do—blackmail me for his dope money.

He stood there in the kitchen with that smirk on his face and said, "Wouldn't the Franklins like to know about how you worked as a waitress in that topless restaurant? And what would they think if I told them about the pot you were smoking out in California?"

He was right, of course. Cal's parents would have stopped the wedding if they had known. But what great crimes were those? It took a while to find that job in the lawyer's office and in the meantime I had to eat. And smoking pot was as common as breathing out there.

I should never have told Jim-

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my about Cal and the engagement and how the Franklins had money, but I was so hurt about how he left me for that other girl that I had to rub it in.

So I had to kill him. I couldn't let him ruin everything. It would have hurt Mother and Dad too much, and they have worked hard for the money that is paying for this big wedding.

And it was so easy. Asking him if he wanted some fruit and cheese. He loved fruit and cheese. And carrying that sharp long-bladed paring knife to the refrigerator, and when I was behind him, putting it in his back just the way that funny little man in Berkeley showed me one evening. Of course, I had to take care of the fingerprints and the other evidence that might have pointed to me. Working a year in the office of a criminal lawyer was sure helpful.

I took Jimmy's identification papers down to the new house. There was plenty of time to get rid of them. It seemed like a good touch and would slow down the investigation. And knowing the habits of the neighbors, I knew that was the one time of day a stranger could have come down our street and entered our house without being seen.

The blue-and-white convertible was an afterthought inspired by Cal's questions. And putting that pot in the refrigerator was a marvelous way to get rid of the last of my supply. Cal is too straight to ever let me smoke it, and it's too much trouble to sneak around. I was going to "discover" it myself if Grandmother hadn't beat me to it.

So now there is no one to spoil the wedding. Mrs. Calvin Franklin will live happily ever after.

I reach back and straighten the long white train of my wedding gown and take my father's arm. The organist nods her head—our signal to start down the aisle.

Here comes the bride!

"Q"

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This is the 415th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a "performance piece" in words . . .

The author, Roberta Snyder, was 27 and single when she submitted her first story. She has a B.A. in history from Pomona College and an M.A. in the history of art from the University of California in Berkeley. Her M.A. thesis was titled "The Effect of the Soviet Revolution on Russian Art."

Her hobbies include visiting museums and art galleries, reading (especially medieval English history, Russian literature, and murder mysteries), sewing, and yoga . . .

PERFORMANCE PIECE

by ROBERTA SNYDER

"He's the latest rage," a svelte, middle-aged matron said to an equally elegant friend as they walked toward the new Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

"Lois was telling me about him," the friend replied. "She saw him at the Whitney. He must be out of his mind. I mean, what if there were an accident or some joker actually pulled the switch. Just thinking about it sends shivers up my spine! I certainly wouldn't want to be in his shoes."

"I can't imagine anything disastrous happening," the first woman said reassuringly. "I doubt if it even works. He couldn't be *that* foolhardy or depraved. But I am curious to see him. He is supposed to have style, and sometimes he puts on quite an outrageous show."

Near the entrance to the gallery a tall, dark, brooding man, wearing blue jeans and a fisherman's knit sweater, idled by a Paul Brach canvas. He was in no hurry to see the evening's star attraction. There was plenty of time for that later. For the present he was content to wrap himself in solitude—one is never so alone as in a crowd—and to gaze at an excellent painting.

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His contemplation of the Brach, however, was cut short by the arrival of a stocky bearded young man, with a face like Socrates', who stared intently at him for a moment, hesitated, then hailed him loudly with "Greg! My Lord, it's been years! How are you?"

Although displeased by this sudden intrusion into his privacy (Steve Rohr's surname rhymed with bore, he thought uncharitably), Greg Alpers returned the smile and said warmly, "Steve, fancy meeting you here. When was it? Not since graduation. What have you been up to?"

"Well, let's see. I married Joanne Miller. You remember Jo. Too bad she couldn't be here tonight. We'd have a real class reunion. I practice law in Santa Monica. Jo's finishing a Ph.D. in sociology at U.C.L.A. We have a two-year-old boy. Now, tell me about yourself."

Alpers scratched the back of his head. "Been bumming around mostly. I lived in Europe for a while. Studied painting in Florence and sculpture in Rome. A year in New York . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You've lost weight. In fact, I hardly recognized you, you look so gaunt. Have you been ill?"

"I have been in the hospital," Alpers admitted.

"Oh," Rohr muttered.

"Nervous breakdown," Alpers said in answer to the other's unspoken question.

Rohr did not comment. An awkward silence fell between the two men. "What brings you here?" Alpers asked at last.

"The opening of the Gallery is an event. It's a great opportunity to see and be seen. A lawyer has to circulate, you know. Also, I want to see Davy do his stuff. We were roommates for a semester. We didn't have very much in common, but we got along all right. I thought I'd watch him infuriate us complacent bourgeoisie for old times' sake."

"The old school tie," Alpers said jeeringly.

Rohr shrugged. "There could be worse bonds," he replied, somewhat nettled. "I take it you're here because of your love for modern art."

Alpers grinned. "Sarcasm does not become you, Steve. I *am* an artist. But I too came to pay my respects to Davy. I didn't know him well in college, strangely enough. However, we met again in New York and became pals. You might say that my presence, like yours, is partially motivated by nostalgia, although a different nostalgia from yours."

"Davy" was a slender,

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26-year-old named David Kingsley. A leading exponent of the so-called performance piece, Kinglsey was acclaimed by his admirers as the Malevitch of the 1970's. He was dismissed by serious critics as a self-destructive poseur and throwback to Nineteenth Century romanticism, and he was decried by three-fifths of his audience as a weirdo. But no matter how he was regarded, Kingsley had achieved an enviable celebrity—or notoriety—in the art world.

For a night's work he demanded a fee of $1500. He had already played New York, Boston, Chicago, Houston, Dallas, and San Francisco. Tonight was Los Angeles' turn. In six months he would probably be passé. In a year his name might sound vaguely familiar, but it would probably signify nothing. That is, unless he could latch onto another gimmick and parlay his initial success into a continuing *succès de scandale à la* famous avant-gardists.

To entertain his audience Kingsley traded banter and insults, swapped dirty jokes, and argued about politics. When he felt especially energetic, he recited poetry—he had a special fondness for medieval French verse and Ezra Pound—or he read aloud, usually articles from *Playboy* or *Evergreen Review*. When he was in an exceptionally good mood, he sang. And when he felt bored or lethargic, he would ignore the audience altogether and bury himself in a copy of *The New York Times* or *Art in America*.

Despite his negligible talents as a performer, people flocked to see him, fascinated not by what he did but by his personality and paraphernalia. While talking, reciting, reading, or singing, Kingsley sat strapped inside a homemade electric chair. The chair was connected in back to a small generator. The generator insured that wherever he performed, he would have sufficient voltage at his command.

In front the chair was attached by heavy wires to a 12-by-9-inch black box which rested on a nearby table. In the center of the box lay a switch. Dangling from the ceiling, above the box, was a crude hand-printed sign which invited the audience to *Pull Me*. It was a simple generator, and the hookup from the chair to the switch was primitive. But it was fully operative. If anyone ever pulled that switch, David Kingsley would die.

His charming manners to rich art patrons and his politeness to reporters offstage not-

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withstanding, on stage Kingsley engaged in dangerous needling. He was defying his audience to murder him, and chances were that eventually someone would.

Whether or not a particular performance succeeded depended, in Kingsley's opinion, on the degree of audience participation. If people just sat or stood gaping at him and then drifted away, the evening was a failure. If enough people exchanged wisecracks or became embroiled in arguments over art or politics, the evening was a success. At least, he kept himself amused. And if anyone threatened, made feints, or touched him or his apparatus, the evening was a big success.

Kingsley adored flirting with death. His greatest triumph occurred in Dallas. There his effeminate looks and ringing denunciation of the oil-depletion allowance so enraged a self-made oil millionaire that the man stomped on stage, snarling that he'd fix him once and for all. Kingsley was saved from grievous bodily harm only by the determined tuggings and pleadings of the oil man's wife and daughter. Besides being marvelous publicity, the incident thrilled Kingsley to the core.

Periodically he would enliven his performance by having a friend join in. His cohort would swagger on stage, shower him with abuse, and perhaps with sham physical violence while Kingsley sat unflinching and shot off quips. It was good, clean sado-masochistic fun, and it kept what Kingsley liked to call his "fans" guessing. They could never tell when something "terrible" might really happen.

A platform had been set up for this night's performance at the northern end of the new gallery. Surrounding it on three sides were a half dozen rows of chairs. By 8:30 every chair was filled, and a sizable crowd were standing on the periphery.

Kingsley had dressed for the occasion in purple trousers, a sequined blue-silk shirt, and rhinestoned sandals. With his longish blond hair, delicate features, and slightly decadent air he was as beautiful as a fallen angel.

His L.A. debut found him in exceptionally high spirits. This was, he decided, an evening for singing. Kingsley liked to consider himself another Mick Jaegger. He began with early Beatles and Stones and was working his way through mid-60's Dylan when Greg Alpers stepped onto the platform.

Kingsley stopped singing. "Hi, Nemesis," he said coolly. The audience, which had been

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growing restive, perked up. Was the real show beginning? Only Steve Rohr, watching from the back of the room, was disturbed by Alpers' appearance onstage.

Alpers smiled. "Hello, Davy. Sorry I haven't caught your act before, but I've been sick. You don't mind if I look around, do you?"

"No, go ahead. Touch anything you want."

"Anything, Davy? What a lovely contraption. Quaint but lethal. You didn't rig it up all by yourself, did you?"

Kingsley shook his head. "No."

"I thought not." Alpers ran his hands caressingly over the electric chair, examined the generator closely, then strolled over to the table. Slowly he lowered his right hand until it was a quarter inch from the switch. He swiveled to face Kingsley. "I won't pull it, Davy. Not yet."

The corners of Kingsley's mouth twitched, but he said nothing.

"I'd be justified in killing you," Alpers continued. "You agree, don't you?"

"Kill me if you like, but don't rake that up again," Kingsley muttered.

"You're more concerned about your reputation than your life. How splendid of you!"

Alpers turned abruptly and addressed the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, you have a rare treat in store for you tonight," he announced, strutting across the stage. "You've come to look at my friend in the electric chair. Why? To admire his voice? Surely Davy's singing isn't top-forty quality. To listen to him read poetry? He's no John Gielgud. To hear him discuss world affairs? He's no Henry Kissinger. No, I'll tell you why you've come. You've come to witness a murder. You and thousands like you. In city after city you've been disappointed, let down by the reluctance of some unbelieving prankster or madman to separate himself from the herd and commit the ultimate act —homicide. Tonight I volunteer to sacrifice my life and Davy's life for your pleasure." He made an elaborate and graceful bow.

"Far out," a spectator yelled. Alpers smiled. Others in the crowd stirred uneasily. This had to be part of the show. It had to be. Kingsley squirmed in his chair, but did not cry out for help. Had he always expected this moment?

Steve Rohr moved toward the platform. If this had been rehearsed between them, he'd feel like a damn fool interfering. But Greg had given him the impression that he hadn't seen

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Davy since leaving New York, and that note of menace in his voice sounded terrifyingly genuine. What if Greg was a psychotic? What if he really intended to pull the switch?

"Steve, you're just in time," Alpers greeted him as Rohr climbed on stage, "to bid Davy farewell."

"Hi, Steve," Kingsley said.

"You don't mean it," Rohr told Alpers.

"Oh, but I do. Tell him, Davy."

"He wants to humiliate me," Kingsley said shakily. "He wants me to blubber and beg for mercy. He knows that if I grovel before him, I'll be ruined professionally. And that would delight him. He hates me. He may kill me even if I do grovel. He hates me that much."

"That's right," Alpers said.

"I'm not going to plead," Kingsley retorted. "Go ahead, Greg. Pull it."

"You once theorized that only artists with a death wish ever did performance pieces. Too true."

Alpers advanced to the table.

"No, Greg!" Rohr cried. He rushed toward Alpers, but Alpers was ready for him. With what seemed to be a flick of the wrist he sent Rohr sprawling. An instant later Rohr regained his balance. But it was an instant too late for David Kingsley. Greg Alpers had pulled the switch.

Alpers turned to Rohr. "I wonder which of us will get more space in tomorrow's *Times*," Alpers said quietly. "Davy or me?"

"Why, Greg? Why did you do it?" Rohr whispered in horror.

"Davy was a rotten little thief," Alpers replied. "I loved him like a brother. I trusted him, and he betrayed me. He stole my idea. This piece was my inspiration. Mine! Mine . . ."

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a *NEW* spy story by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Another adventure of the nameless C.I.A. agent, this one involving a memorandum from the head of the Chinese Espionage service to Premier Chou En-lai, a memorandum which, in the wrong hands, would be "political dynamite" that could blow up the world of diplomacy . . .

THE K'ANG SHENG MEMORANDUM

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

It was warm and fine even for a Sunday in late May and the Garden of Remembrance was crowded—ironically, since this was a Russian memorial, with tourists from the West. One result of that, though, was that my tie and western-cut suit weren't conspicuously out of place, so nobody paid any particular attention to me as I strolled past the drooping stone flags and kneeling figures into the garden proper. Once there I mingled with the crowd for a while, then drifted casually over to the side to pretend to study one of the plinths inscribed with quotes from Great Wartime Leader Stalin.

Several yards away a short stout man with a pale knobby face and bald bullet head stood staring impassively at another plinth. In his left hand he held a copy of *Neues Deutschland* folded into a tight flat square. Which marked him as my contact—whoever that was.

"It's a simple matter really," Giddings had said, leaning back in his chair and gesturing with the pencil he seemed always to have in his hand. "All you have to do is run over to East Berlin and meet this man."

I looked over at him suspiciously, having learned in the years we'd worked together—he as C.I.A. controller, me as

1974 by Robert Edward Eckels.

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agent—that his definition of a simple matter and mine didn't always agree. "What man?" I said. "And, more importantly, what does he want?"

"To tell the truth," Giddings said with another wave of the pencil, "I don't know. It's a blind meet, pure and simple. But from the way the message setting it up was delivered, it looks as if he might be a professional."

"Working on his own," I said, "or under orders?"

Giddings smiled at me disingenuously. "That's what I want you to find out," he said.

Which was why I now found myself in a Soviet war memorial in East Berlin, on the wrong side of the wall from all my friends, trying to decide whether the contact was clean or not. In the final analysis, though, the only way to find out for sure was to go ahead and make the contact. So after another moment or two I took a similarly folded newspaper from inside my jacket and went over to join the short man.

He took me and my paper in with a glance, then tucked his into his side pocket. "You're late," he said without preamble. His voice was harsh and brusque and more than a little irritating. "You weren't followed, were you?"

"No," I said.

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," I said, letting the annoyance show. "Do you think I'd be here if I weren't?"

The short man studied me for a long moment. Then he nodded, a slight, barely perceptible movement that seemed to reflect more an inner decision than a response to my question. "You must forgive me," he said. "But when one is on the run—as I have been for over the past month—one becomes excessively cautious. It's how one stays alive."

"On the run from whom?" I said.

The short man permitted himself a brief smile. "At times it seems everyone," he said. He paused and looked out beyond me as if to survey the crowd. "My name is Grigor Ulanov," he said. "The name means nothing in itself, of course. Which in a sense is the measure of my success. Because for the past twenty years I've been a member of the foreign section of the KGB. Which would make me pretty much your Russian opposite, wouldn't it?"

"Pretty much," I agreed. "What is it you want now? To change sides?"

Ulanov shook his head. "No," he said emphatically. "Circumstances which I would rather not

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go into have made it necessary for me to—ah—terminate my relationship with the KGB. But I have no desire to exchange one set of masters for another. I've had enough of this damn business and I want to retire. Unfortunately, I can't get out of this city with its wall and ring of border guards without help."

He turned to look me full in the face. "Of course," he said, "I've been around long enough to know that no one does something for nothing. So before I left, I took the precaution of photocopying dossiers of Soviet agents operating in your territory. Not all, of course, but enough to make up a fairly bulky package, which I will turn over to you when you get me out of East Germany and onto a plane for Switzerland."

"Where is the package now?" I said.

"In a safe place," Ulanov said. "But, of course, I understand your concern. You don't want to commit yourself without some assurance I can produce what I promise. So I'm prepared to make a down payment, give you what you call a free sample. One name in advance. You check it out and if you're satisfied I'm telling the truth, we have a deal. If not"—he shrugged—"you simply forget we ever had this conversation. All right?"

I nodded slowly. "What's the name?" I said.

"Arnold Ruth," Ulanov said without hesitation. "At the present time he is a senior political officer in your diplomatic mission to West Berlin. He's been our agent, however, for the past four years and in that time he's passed over an invaluable amount of sensitive information—the latest being complete details on the K'ang Sheng Memorandum." He paused and cocked his head to one side. "Is that sufficient for you to go on?"

"I'd think so," I said. "How do I get in touch with you if I decide I want to?"

Ulanov took a slip of paper from his pocket and passed it over. "Call that number," he said, "and ask for Heinrich. You'll be told when and where he can be reached. Double the house number one street west will be our meeting place. And," he added, "when you do call, do it from an *East* German phone, please. Having gotten this far, I'd take it very badly if my former colleagues caught me because someone was careless."

And with that he gave me a curt nod and walked off to melt into the crowd. I gave him a few minutes to get clear, then left myself. As far as I could tell, nobody in the crowd was

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paying the slightest attention to me.

The Chief of the U.S. Diplomatic Mission to West Berlin was a frosty New Englander named Collins, and he made it clear when I called at his house that he didn't much like having his Sunday afternoon disturbed. He liked it even less when I told him why I had come.

"That's impossible," he said. "Why, I've known Arnold Ruth for years, and the man would no more turn traitor than I would."

"Nevertheless," I said mildly, "the accusation has been made. And I have to follow it up—one way or the other."

Collins sniffed. "I take it that's intended to mean that if I don't cooperate you'll just bull ahead on your own. Very well then, what is it you want to know?"

"For a start," I said, "whether there is such a thing as a K'ang Sheng Memorandum. And whether Ruth was aware of its contents."

Collins hesitated, then nodded. "Yes," he said, "there is. And yes, Arnold knew about it." He sighed. "And somebody did leak it to the Russians, didn't they? I hate to think it was Arnold. But then I'd hate to think it was any of the others either."

"Who else knew?" I said.

"Here in Berlin, myself and George Eidem our cryptanalyst. Perhaps half a dozen others in Washington."

I looked at him curiously. "It must be a pretty special piece of paper," I said, "to rate such a restricted audience."

Collins smiled wryly. "In a sense," he said, "very special. And under the circumstances I see no harm in telling you that it purports to be a memorandum from one K'ang Sheng, head of the Communist Chinese espionage service, to Premier Chou En-lai detailing and requesting approval of plans to assassinate the President of the United States. It was dated October 1963—which, of course, made it political dynamite. Because one month later a President *was* assassinated. And as sensitive an issue as that assassination still is, knowledge of Red Chinese involvement would alienate the entire American public and make any policy of rapprochement with China political suicide for decades to come.

"Be that as it may, the document surfaced here in Berlin about two months ago in the possession of a rather unsavory character named Ferguson. This man Ferguson claimed to have deserted from the Army in Vietnam and to have made his

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way via Hanoi into Red China, where he was employed by K'ang Sheng's department.

"There's no need to go into details, but essentially Ferguson's story was that he had come across the memorandum by accident, recognized its implications, and stole it, escaping across the border into Russia and working his way west by various stratagems. And now that he was safely this side of the Iron Curtain he was prepared to turn the memo over to the U.S.—for a price, of course.

"Put simply, he wanted $50,000 plus full amnesty on the desertion charge. Which wasn't an unreasonable offer at all—given Ferguson's assumption that the government was so committed to its present policy of closer ties with China that it would pay to hush the matter up.

"If we didn't meet his terms, he was prepared to offer the document to the Russians—who would be only too glad to publish it, because if there's one thing the Russians fear it's that the U.S. and China will form an alliance against them. And, frankly, I found myself in something of a dilemma, complicated by the fact that neither I nor any of my staff can read Chinese. So I did what any sensible bureaucrat would do. I fired off an immediate cable to Washington explaining the situation and asking for instructions."

Collins sighed and showed me another wry smile. "Their response was predictable, of course: they wanted to examine the document before making any commitment. That posed a problem of a different sort, though, because Ferguson wasn't about to let the document out of his possession in advance of payment. Nor, because of the desertion charge still hanging over his head, would he undertake to deliver it in person. In the end, however, he agreed to let me make a photocopy and that was forwarded to Washington by special courier. Arnold Ruth was the courier."

"Was he aware of what he was carrying?" I said.

"Of course," Collins said. "You must remember that Arnold is a *senior* officer and that I had every reason to trust both his loyalty and his discretion. Besides, as my full deputy he was able to bring the decision back with him."

"Which was?"

Collins smiled again. "To forget the whole thing," he said. "Because, you see, the document was a forgery."

"You're sure of that?"

Collins nodded. "It wasn't even a very good one," he said.

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"To begin with, it had been written by someone unfamiliar with the language reforms introduced by the Communists in the 1950's. Moreover, there were a number of small anachronisms reflecting knowledge of events that occurred after the assassination. I'm quoting from the report Arnold brought back, of course. But Ferguson confirmed it all by breaking down when confronted with the evidence and confessing that the whole thing was a swindle."

Collins' lips curved down disdainfully. "The only truth to his story was the part about his deserting from the Army, and he was—ah—persuaded to surrender to the military authorities here. The last I heard he had been sent back to the States for court-martial."

"And the memorandum?"

"Languishing in some file drawer in Washington, I presume," Collins said, "where, except for this, it would have been mercifully forgotten. Arnold, George Eidem, and I discussed it at some length when Arnold got back and agreed to keep it among ourselves unless and until Washington decided to publicize the incident. So far they haven't. And that really is all I can tell you. I trust you've found it helpful."

"Very," I said.

Collins nodded solemnly. "Then I'd appreciate it if you'd reciprocate," he said, "and keep me informed of the results of your investigation."

I said I would and rose to go. Before I left, though, I got Arnold Ruth's home address from him.

Ruth's apartment occupied most of the top floor of a modest building not far from Templehof. There was no answer to my knock and the mail still in his box down in the lobby indicated he'd been gone at least since yesterday. Which, of course, made me more than a little curious. So I forced the lock with a strip of plastic and went inside.

It was a standard three-room apartment: combination living room and dining room, bedroom, and kitchenette. Not luxurious, but comfortable and immaculately kept.

I found Ruth in the bath. He sprawled on the bottom of the tub, looking pathetically old and shrunken. The technical term is death by disensanguination, and there was no need to wonder how it had happened. Both wrists faced up, exposing bone deep slashes from the heels of the hands across past the bases of the thumbs. The razor that had made the slashes lay on the floor beside him, rusting through the stains.

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I backed out quickly and then when my stomach and nerves had settled began to search the apartment. Nothing was obviously out of place. But in one corner of the living room was a small writing stand with a typewriter on it. Some paper had been left in the machine and on it was typed: "Ulanov has run. Only a matter of time before I'm exposed. God, why did I get involved in this?"

The message was rolled up off the platen but was unsigned. I left it where it was and went back outside, carefully locking the door behind me because I didn't want Ruth "found" officially just yet.

Later that evening I dialed the number Ulanov had given me and asked for Heinrich.

I met Ulanov the second time in a small café near the Friederichstrasse Bahnhof. It was early the following morning and he sat at the table mopping up the last of his breakfast.

"So," he said, "my down payment was satisfactory, was it?"

"Satisfactory enough," I said. "We'll expect a lot more, though, when you're over on our side."

"Of course," Ulanov said. He popped a piece of toast in his mouth, chewed and swallowed. "How do you intend to take me across?" he said.

"Does it matter," I said, "as long as I get you across?"

Ulanov stopped eating and looked at me steadily. "Yes," he said. "It matters very much. Because before I commit myself to any plan I want to be sure I'm increasing my chances of survival and not lessening them. So, please, no midnight swims across the canal or crawls through the barbed wire."

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I was thinking of getting you a false passport and slipping you right through one of the checkpoints. Assuming that meets with your approval."

Ulanov thought for a moment, then nodded. "It has the virtue of simplicity," he said, "and I like that. So I approve. When will you do it?"

"As soon as I can get the passport fixed up," I said. "Later today."

Ulanov nodded again. "Very good," he said. Then he pushed back his chair and rose. "After dark would be best, I think. So I shall meet you back outside here tonight at seven o'clock. All right?"

"Fine," I said.

Ulanov gave me another curt nod, turned briskly on his heel, and marched out of the restaurant. Through the window I

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saw him cross the street rapidly, and when I left myself a few minutes later he was already nowhere in sight.

I was a good ten minutes late making the rendezvous at the café, but Ulanov was even later, and I stationed myself in the shadows by the corner to wait for him.

I had barely gotten settled, though, when a small furtive man sidled up to me. "God, I thought you'd never show up," he said. Then he added quickly, "I'm Heinrich. We spoke on the phone. Double the house number and one street west?"

"I remember," I said. "Where's Ulanov?"

He smiled bitterly. "Where that false passport of yours won't help him any more, I'm afraid. The police came to the roominghouse right after he left to meet you this morning —looking for him. I would have warned him, but they wouldn't let any of us out of the house. And then when he came back, they hid behind the door and grabbed him as he came in." Heinrich shuddered. "It was awful," he said. "I was just lucky they didn't know I'd helped him. Otherwise, they'd have taken me too."

I nodded thoughtfully. "What happened to the package he had for me?" I said.

"I don't know," Heinrich said. "It was hidden somewhere, but he never would tell me where. And with the police nosing about now—" He paused and his eyes slid past me. "Look," he said, "it's not really safe for me to be seen talking to you too long, and I've told you all I know. So with your permission I'll say *'Lebe wohl.*"

I nodded, and he scuttled away down the street. As his footsteps faded out, another sound came in to replace them: a car motor—in the distance still, but coming fast and headed this way. It could have meant anything or nothing, but I didn't stay to find out.

There were three of us in Giddings' office when I reported: myself, Giddings —lounging as usual behind his desk and toying with his pencil—and, because of my promise to keep him informed, Collins from the Diplomatic Mission.

"I don't suppose second-guessing serves any purpose at this point," Collins said when I had finished. "But it does seem a pity you didn't have a plan ready for smuggling Ulanov across this morning."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," I said. "Because Ulanov never intended to come over."

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"That's ridiculous," Collins said. "Of course he intended to come over. Why else would he have contacted us?"

"I can think of one very good reason," I said. "Here were the Russians sitting on what must have seemed the hottest story of this or any other year. Only they couldn't do anything with it without tipping us off that there was a leak somewhere in our top circle. So they brought Ulanov in. The whole purpose of his 'defection' was simply to convince us Ruth was the traitor and keep us from finding and plugging the *real* leak.

"And that's a little more than mere speculation. Things started to smell sour when I found Ruth so conveniently dead with that note explaining all stuck in his typewriter. It was just a little too good to be true. Besides, *both* his wrists were slashed right down to the bone. And he couldn't have done that himself, because when you cut that deep you sever muscles controlling the fingers as well as the artery, and he literally couldn't have continued to hold the razor. Verdict: murder. Not suicide.

"Then there's the matter of Ulanov's 'arrest.' If Heinrich was telling the truth, if he really was held prisoner in that house and Ulanov was picked up as he came in the door, then they had no chance to communicate. So how did Heinrich find out Ulanov and I were to meet back at the café—or, more importantly, that I was going to furnish Ulanov with a fake passport?" I shrugged. "From there," I said, "it was just a matter of reasoning it out and eliminating the impossible until—"

"Until you arrived at the probable," Collins finished for me. He nodded heavily. "And no doubt your reasoning is correct. Unfortunately, it still leaves us with only half of the answer. Unless, of course, you know who the real traitor is."

"No," I said. "But we do have a pretty good clue, don't we? The Russians wouldn't have gone to all this trouble if they'd known the document was a forgery. So all we have to do is look for a source they *couldn't* have learned that from."

Collins smiled wryly. "Your logic's holding up very well," he said. "But unfortunately for your theory everyone on our side involved with the memorandum knew it was false."

"Then there's no question, is there?" I said. "They must have got the information from you."

Collins recoiled and looked at me aghast. "You must be out of your mind!" he said.

"No," I said. "And I'm not

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calling you a traitor either. But the fact is, the Russians know pretty much what you sent in your cable. They never learned what was in the report that Ruth carried back with him—and which any one of you could have passed on to them. So the answer has to be that they've tapped the cable and broken your code."

"Good Lord," Collins said, looking even more profoundly shocked. "You mean they've been reading everything I've sent out!"

"That's right," I said. I glanced over at Giddings, who was sitting forward eagerly now and obviously calculating how we could use a broken code the Russians didn't know we knew about to feed them false information. I smiled wryly. "Something gentlemen never do. Unfortunately, there don't seem to be many gentlemen left—on either side."

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDBOUNDS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Forbes, Stanton	BURY ME IN GOLD LAME	Doubleday Crime Club	$4.95	9/27
Fraser, Anthea	LAURA POSSESSED	Dodd, Mead	5.95	9/3
Jay, Charlotte	THE VOICE OF THE CRAB	Harper & Row	5.95	9/11
Keating, H. R. F.	BATS FLY UP FOR INSPECTOR GHOTE	Doubleday Crime Club	4.95	9/6
Masterson, Whit	THE MAN WITH TWO CLOCKS	Dodd, Mead	5.95	9/23

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Despite my recurring gripe that mystery mongers now dazzle their fans with almost everything except mystery, tolerant interpretation of the rules will allow us to include the present month's crop in this category. A story may be classed as mystery, perhaps, if the outcome of the hullabaloo remains in doubt until our author chooses to reveal it.

On this basis, then, I give you four sizzlers among the cops-and-robbers, with several surprises along the way, ranging from massive raid on city or art treasure to the epic gambling-house heist of them all. Don't carp; relax and enjoy.

Parker, the amoral protagonist of *Butcher's Moon*, by Richard Stark (Random House, $4.95), seems not so much lacking in human weakness as utterly devoid of all human feeling. Does he like food, wine, women, or anything else? We don't know; he is thief, strategist, murderer, whom we must accept as forever unrepentant and uncaught.

In the midwestern city of Tyler for hidden plunder some other crook has lifted from him, Parker strikes back lethally to recover his loot. Aided by Alan Grofield, his actorish young partner, he tangles at once with undercover forces ever more murderous as the battle waxes in heat.

At times it seems less cops and robbers than straight robbed and robbers, one of the robbers being an important cop. When they wound and capture Grofield, Parker summons more partners for the mass attack which becomes his own bomber's moon, and recovers enough cash for reasonable compensation. You won't much like the fellow, but he'll fascinate you all the way.

In *Pandora's Box*, by Thomas Chastain (Mason & Lipscomb, $6.95), six priceless paintings from the Metropolitan Museum of Art are stolen and held for ransom in a heist planned by Joe Conant, black young war veteran with a law degree from Columbia.

Opposing sophisticated Conant stands wealthy, sophisticated Deputy Chief Inspector Max Kauffman, N.Y.P.D., Rhodes scholar

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and also a lawyer as well. But Kauffman can't be everywhere. It's a daring and ingenious robbery, not least daring or ingenious in the hiding place for the stolen paintings, which will wallop the most experienced reader with its legitimate surprise punch.

Well, let's not anticipate. The aching tug of war between cops and robbers holds one more surprise before the end. Still, since we have been led to sympathize both with Inspector Kauffman for the cops and Joe Conant for the robbers, the penultimate burst of gunplay might have ended worse. If you want expert storytelling as well as sound characterization and credible psychology, don't miss this one.

Ex-Major Patrick Clancy, formerly American Army, survives more perils than mysteries in John Murphy's *The El Greco Puzzle* (Scribners, $6.95), whose action blazes across three continents and much of civilization.

Living in Paraguay, sent to Spain as agent for an exiled French millionaire of dubious repute, Clancy undertakes to return with the smallish El Greco studies which were not taken in Napoleon's time but must be spirited away now.

Can Clancy do it? He is irked by French authority, hounded by predators, jeered at rather than aided by Susan Allgood, the captivating art adviser who says she hates him. Even Marshal Massena had no such task; the cards seem hopelessly stacked.

How Clancy suffered a change of mind after Susan has suffered a change of heart; how he voted with the angels at San Ildefonso Monastery; how chief predator and stooges get their come-uppance: all these climax an action thriller every reader can enjoy.

A temple-of-chance complex called The Klondike roars as background for *Las Vegas*, by Arthur Moore and Clayton Matthews (Pocket Books, $1.50). Each of those present—worried manager, honeymoon couple, Texas millionaire, pilfering dealer-girl, Mafia agent—has some part to play, even if mere supernumerary, in a king-size robbery which pries open the Klondike's strongroom.

Here's one hell of an upset. The few sympathetic characters emerge with honor; we need have no fear for Brent, the manager, or for Billie Ray, the Texan relaxing with stud poker and blondes. Though the authors might have spared us certain crudities of speech during their heavy emphasis on sex, the plotting is so dovetailed and the whole picture so convincing that it holds its pace until the end.

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Gerald Tomlinson's "first stories"—another double entry—were titled "The Perfectionist" and "The Quick Red Fox," and both appeared in the February 1974 issue of EQMM. The contrast in these two stories was striking—one was a serious study in crime, the other a lighthearted one.

In his second story (third, to be strictly accurate) Mr. Tomlinson continues his serious probing of crime and its relationship to character and vice versa—in this case, of a multiple murderer whose next victim would be Number Eight . . .

SIX GROOVES OF LEFT TWIST

by GERALD TOMLINSON

He had a compulsion to kill. He saw nothing unusual in it. The man in the next office had a compulsion to take off on biweekly martini binges. The departmental secretary had a compulsion to consume ice cream until she now filled a size-twenty dress. His wife, a talkative clotheshorse, had many compulsions, one of which was to adopt stray Port Chester cats; there were 18 of the mewing beasts underfoot at last count. Dipsomania. Sitomania. Ailuromania.

Did his compulsion have a name? He didn't know. It wasn't necromania, since he loathed the idea of death, of slabs, of graves. Even the sight of blood and of vacant lifeless eyes nauseated him. He searched the faces of his victims before they fell, not after. Oh, how he searched their faces.

Of course, that was it. The sight of their faces, their changing expressions, their failed masks at the very end. He sought the spontaneity of life, and found it at the moment of death. He saw people then, not robots but people; he saw them shocked, terrified, unbelieving, resigned. He nodded at this insight, the vivid recollections, wondered if he should keep a journal. No, he'd better not.

1974 by Gerald Tomlinson

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He murdered only strangers, and he forced himself to be cautiously random in choosing them. Four men, three women. Victim Number One, a mewling old doorman named O'Dowd, on West 72nd Street. The latest, Victim Number Seven, a chic babbling airline stewardess named Fahey, in Woodside, Queens.

Their names appeared in the newspapers. The murders were, strictly speaking, motiveless. They were scattered throughout the five boroughs of New York City and were at least seven months apart. O'Dowd had crumpled to the pavement almost a decade ago. The police had no suspects in any of the cases.

He used a .32-caliber pearl-handled automatic pistol, a bloodied heirloom. It was a small, easily concealed weapon, 60 years old. It had traveled to Alaska in the 1920's with a half-mad uncle, a luckless prospector who had finally turned it on himself.

It then passed to his father, a silent, ascetic dreamer, who fired it just once, at a nighttime prowler in his home who, when the lights went on, proved to be a dear neighbor, unaccountably skulking in the den. The incident, inquest and all, left his father's mind unsettled.

The gun passed to him, and it had served him efficiently—three shots per person, no more, except for Delgado, Victim Number Five, a plumber on Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn. Delgado had required five bullets, two in the back. Stupid. Stalker's error. He had been drinking that night, foolishly drinking, but he was sober-minded enough to know that a wounded victim, a victim not dead, meant possible detection. Delgado, with his quick, darting movements, scared eyes, and tough sinews, had almost got away.

He kept the pistol in an unlocked desk drawer in his office. A tissue box at the back of the drawer held it safely. It was concealed under an 8.25-by-9.75-inch piece of cardboard, on top of which were 100 undisturbed yellow tissues. He hadn't used or touched the gun in six months, but he kept it always loaded, ready.

His office looked down through curtained glass on the Avenue of the Americas, at 46th Street. A carpeted fluorescent sanctuary for his routine, well-paid actuarial duties. An office seldom visited. At work as on the streets, he was a loner, a man at home with numbers, but seeking more: unguarded humanity, people as organisms, vital living men and women with faces that re-

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vealed, not concealed. He never confided this need even to his wife; it was an inmost seeking.

A large manila envelope with a routing slip lay on his desk that morning, its weight indicating its purpose. The Actuarial Department was once again collecting money to buy an inexpensive gift for an unknown cubicle-sitter. The gift would help him or her celebrate an occasion that no one in the office would attend.

He was right, in general. It seemed that Mrs. Nettie Phillips, the cleaning lady—he had never met her in ten years—had lost her husband to a Saturday Night Special, D.O.A., on (appropriately) the previous Saturday night. The gunman remained at large. The company naturally wanted to show its sympathy. The collection, mostly half dollars and quarters, would buy a floral arrangement.

He dropped two quarters into the maw, initialed his Xerox-copied name, and slipped the envelope into his Out box.

Two weeks passed. Two weeks like most other two weeks, sequestered and arithmetical, filled with bustling anonymity, with stalled commuter trains, with howling Port Chester cats. But then, one ordinary Monday morning, the world fell apart.

He arrived a few minutes early to find two men in his office. One was fat, rather like Lou Costello, the other lean, a ringer for Bud Abbott. They had badges, cigarettes, coffee, and two warrants. They also had his .32-caliber pearl-handled automatic pistol, which was lying, accusingly, in the center of his desk.

"Is that your gun?" the fat officer asked politely.

The pistol was unregistered; he took a chance. "I never saw it before in my life."

"Then why was it hidden in your desk?"

"Was it?"

"Until last Thursday it was. That morning we got an anonymous tip about the whereabouts of the gun used in the Phillips murder. So we got a search warrant—here's a copy if you're interested. We picked up the pistol here in your office that night, turned it over to ballistics. Pretty soon the guys down in ballistics—let me tell you, they started turning handstands. You know what I mean?"

"No. They sound a little weird."

"Well, maybe they are. But that's not the point. What we want to know is, why did you kill Owen Phillips?"

"Who the devil is Owen Phillips?"

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"A Lenox Avenue bartender, killed sixteen days ago in Harlem. Four shots on the street at four a.m."

"I never go to Harlem."

Lou Costello's look-alike spread his hands as if in sympathy. "The .32 pistol on your desk killed Owen Phillips. Six grooves of left twist, according to ballistics. That's a phrase we've all heard quite a few times over the years—six grooves of left twist."

His breath started to come quickly now. He saw the shape of danger. He tried to fight back the panic. After all, he hadn't killed anyone called Owen Phillips. Where had he heard the name Phillips? Abruptly, as in a garish nightmare, he remembered. The cleaning woman. Who else? Nettie Phillips. She must have been the killer. She had found the gun while cleaning his office, had borrowed it for one night, used it on her husband, and now she was trying to frame him. Well, she wouldn't get away with it.

"Gentlemen," he said shakily, "you're making a bad mistake."

The lean cop put on a sneer, perfect Bud Abbott, and shook his head. "The boys at ballistics don't think so. They've been waiting for this break a long time. The second warrant is for your arrest."

"But why?" he asked in a stranger's voice, a nasal voice that cracked. "Why? I don't know a man named Owen Phillips. Why would I kill him—a stranger? Whose gun is this? What are you trying to do? Have you both gone crazy?"

The fat officer gazed through narrow eyes, too sinister for comedy. "Crazy? Look at it this way. Did you know Louis Delgado? Ann Petrasky? How about Jayne Fahey? Frank Banfield? Ever meet Michael O'Dowd? Remember him? Look, ballistics has twenty-three slugs from that pistol of yours. Six grooves of left twist. Those guys in ballistics, they're careful, they keep records, they never throw away evidence."

He swallowed hard, once, twice. "You've got it all wrong. I'm being framed."

The fat one grinned. "Well, to be honest, that warrant doesn't charge you on the Phillips count. It charges you on two others, Delgado and Fahey. Two murders out of—how many was it?"

He began to cower, feeling sick to his stomach. But, no, he was not a coward. He was a cool businesslike killer. They couldn't take him this way.

Quicker than Delgado, he snatched the pistol off the desk and aimed it at Costello. Neither officer moved. Both

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looked surprised, irritated, as if this was a hell of a beginning for a Monday. "I didn't know them," he shouted. He pulled the trigger; the gun clicked harmlessly. "They were strangers. I had no motive. Don't you know that?"

They stared at him, incredulous. Costello whistled.

Out the door he raced, quaking, unthinking, down the tiled hall toward the fire stairs.

"Hold it! Stop!" It was the lean man shouting. Abbott. He sounded perplexed, like a straight man conned.

Stop? He wouldn't stop. "I never knew any of them," he heard himself yelling over his shoulder. "Understand that? Strangers. People in the crowd. Who kills a stranger? What do you think I am, a psycho?"

Suddenly, on the landing to the fire stairs, he stopped, shivering. He faced them, eyes wild, terrified to the depth of his soul. But terrified of what? He fought for self-control. Unexpectedly he began to laugh, a tinkling girlish laugh, eerie even to him. Then he began to cry, for the first time since childhood. Sobs, great shaking sobs, sobs of resignation, the tears streaming down his cheeks in shining torrents. Half blinded by tears, he saw the two policemen through a shimmering mist. They were alert, guns drawn, searching his face.

Tears and now hysteria. He kept his useless gun pointed at the officers, a last defense but no defense. They weren't even looking at the .32. His high-pitched crying, his damned caterwauling, that was what fascinated them. The tears, the failed mask. They were probing his soul. He would have to stop crying. He would have to pull himself together.

With his left hand he reached into his jacket pocket for his handkerchief.

They shot him dead.

"Q"

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a NEW Raffles story by

BARRY PEROWNE

The newest adventure of Mr. A. J. Raffles, the Amateur Cracksman and Cricketer . . . Raffles is the most famous Gentleman Burglar in the annals of English crime-writing—his name is perhaps better known around the world than even that of his French peer, Arsène Lupin, and no American thief or con man—not Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford or The Gray Seal or Jimmy Valentine or Jeff Peters or The Phantom Crook—has reached the pinnacle of international fame to stand beside Raffles and Lupin. In this newest period piece about Raffles, faithful in every detail to its turn-of-the-century tone and background, the great A. J. adds an unusual crime (unusual for him) to his usual second-story work—and adds it with his customary style, which is an appealing kind of English élan . .

THE RAFFLES BOMBSHELL

by BARRY PEROWNE

It so happened that A. J. Raffles was batting when the open carriage with the four portly gentlemen in it entered Lord's Cricket Ground.

A sibilance of whispers ran around the stands, gay with parasols, blazers, and boaters in the heat-shimmer, and from where I was sitting, on a bench on the pavilion terrace, I heard some woman behind me ask:

"Who are they?"

"The one with the beard and the white Homburg hat," a man's voice answered, "is the King."

"Oh, how exciting! Who's that sitting beside him?"

"That's John L. Sullivan, the great prize-fighter."

"Fancy the King going about with prize-fighters!"

"There's only one John L. Sullivan, my dear," the man said tolerantly. "He's in London on a visit, and the King's very taken with him. I expect he

1974 by Philip Atkey

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wants to show Mr. Sullivan something of our summer game. Americans don't play it, you know."

"How strange of them! Oh, look, there's a different flag going up the flagstaff!"

The carriage, with its two tophatted coachmen on the box, and its two fine black horses arching their proud necks against the bearing-reins, was standing now just to the right of the pavilion terrace, in a good position to watch the game.

As the Royal Standard shimmered red-and gold at the summit of the flagstaff, the crowd rose to its feet with a rustle, and the white-flannelled players in their various positions on the great circle of emerald turf faced the carriage and doffed their cricket caps.

The interruption was brief. King Edward VII was a great sportsman, his visit was informal, and with a genial gesture he intimated that play should be resumed.

"There seem to be a lot of policemen about, all of a sudden," said the woman sitting behind me.

"When the King appears, the bobbies pop up everywhere," explained her companion. "Oh, good shot! Well hit, sir!"

Raffles had struck a ball from Kortright, the fastest bowler in the world, firmly to the boundary.

"The King's talking to Mr. Sullivan about something," said the chatterbox.

"He's probably explaining to Mr. Sullivan the technique of that shot A. J. Raffles just made."

"They're lighting cigars," said the chatterbox. "Mr. Sullivan has a diamond ring and stickpin."

"My dear, I beg you," said her companion, "stop staring at the royal carriage. It's simply not done."

"Those poor horses! Why don't the coachmen put nosebags on them to munch in?"

"Evidently the King doesn't intend to stay long—probably just till the Tea Interval, which is due at four o'clock. Now, please, do pay attention to the game."

It was at an interesting stage. Raffles had scored 73, so there was a good chance of his reaching his hundred by teatime. The sun blazed down. Except for the sound of bat meeting ball, and an occasional ripple of handclapping, an increasingly tense hush brooded over the ground as the hands of the pavilion clock crept toward the hour of four.

Suddenly, just as the burly Kortright was making his run

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up to the wicket to launch one of his thunderbolts at Raffles, a wild scream pierced the silence. Kortright almost fell. Recovering himself, he glared off to his left, towards the stand on the side opposite the royal carriage.

"Oh!" gasped the woman behind me. "Whatever's happening?"

From a swirling of the crowd in the stand over there, I saw a lithe, lightly-built figure break free, vault the low rail, and run out onto the turf. The interloper wore white flannel trousers and a pink blazer. I glimpsed dark glasses under the floppy brim of a white linen hat, but it was the globular object in the interloper's hand which wrenched a concerted gasp of horror from the crowd.

"Oh, my God!" muttered a man sitting beside me. "A nihilist!"

From the globular object, considerably larger than a cricket ball, dangled a length of fuse from which, as the interloper hurled the object, overarm, high through the air toward the wicket, trailed a thin feather of smoke.

The bomb landed in mid-wicket, between the two batsmen. The interloper came running on towards the King's carriage. Bobbies raced out to head the interloper off. Seeing them coming, the interloper whipped off the floppy linen hat and dark glasses. Long hair, of a honey colour in the sunshine, rippled down over the interloper's shoulders as, flinging up her hands, she cried out, "Your Majesty—"

Her further words were lost to me, for the bobbies were on her. Crowd and players alike were struck to immobility—all save one. Raffles, his bat raised, was running toward the bomb, which lay with its fuse smoking and rapidly sputtering on the turf.

"Leave it, Raffles!" I was on my feet, shouting at him, in panic. "Don't touch it! Stand back!"

But Raffles slammed down his bat on the fuse. It must have been quickmatch, for it still sputtered fiercely. Raffles threw aside his bat, snatched up the bomb with one batting-gloved hand, jerked the fuse right out of it with the other.

Dropping the little that remained of the fuse, Raffles trod it out with his nailed cricket boot, and, seeing a bobby approaching at the double, lobbed the now harmless bomb to him as casually as if it had been a cricket ball.

A collective sigh of relief went up from the crowd.

"What was she shouting about?" asked the chatterbox behind me, as a group of bob-

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bies hustled the bomb-thrower, quite a young woman, away to some waiting Black Maria. "It sounded like 'Women of England' and 'concubinage.' What's concubinage?"

"It's a form of—uh—subjugation," replied the chatterbox's escort, sounding embarrassed. "By God, though, that was quick thinking by Raffles—a jolly good show! Listen to the people clapping for him!"

"There's a gentleman from the King's carriage gone over to speak to him," said the chatterbox. "Oh, look, the gentleman's taking him to meet the King! D'you think Mr. Raffles will be knighted or something?"

"Hardly that," replied her escort. "Still, congratulations are in order—though, of course, Raffles may merely have been thinking that he didn't want a hole blown in the turf before he'd scored his hundred."

"Sir," I said, turning my head to look the fellow in the eye, "as a personal friend of A. J. Raffles, I resent that remark. No such thought would have entered his head. His action was instinctive—and typical of him."

"I beg your pardon," the young fellow said, with a flush. "I confess the remark was unwarranted. I gladly withdraw it. Uh, come, Daisy dear, I think perhaps we'd better go to tea now."

The couple sidled off, the fellow shamefaced, his chatterbox companion looking back at me curiously.

I glanced across at the royal carriage. Raffles, standing beside it, still wearing his batting-pads, doffed his cap as the King shook hands with him and introduced him to John L. Sullivan. Knowing Raffles as I did, I knew he would not fail to note, as he shook hands with the great pugilist, Mr. Sullivan's diamond ring and stickpin; but I also knew that, King Edward himself having made the introduction, Mr. Sullivan's belongings would remain taboo as far as Raffles was concerned.

A hand gripped my arm. It was the man who had been sitting beside me.

"Did I hear you say, sir," he asked, "that you're a personal friend of A. J. Raffles?"

"I am indeed, sir."

"In that case, I should appreciate it if you would introduce me to him. I see that His Majesty's carriage is departing and the Tea Interval is now upon us. If you could arrange for me to meet Mr. Raffles during the interval, I should be most grateful. I have a proposal to make to him."

Though he had been sitting

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beside me all afternoon, I had not until now taken much note of the man. Impeccably dressed in grey cutaway and grey topper, he was tall and thin, with a sallow, haughty face and a ribboned monocle.

"A proposal?" I said cautiously.

"I am Lord Pollexfen, of the Pollexfen Press. Sir, just listen to this crowd!"

As umpires and players were coming to the pavilion, which Raffles already had entered by a side door, the crowd in the stands was chanting, to rhythmic handclaps, "We—want—A. J. Raffles! We—want—A. J. Raffles!"

"You are hearing, sir," said Lord Pollexfen, "the Voice of Britain! Within an hour, newsboys will be crying on the London streets the name of A. J. Raffles—a name already well-known as standing for all that is finest in English sporting life. To-morrow he will be the subject of laudatory editorials in every newspaper in the land. For some time I've been seeking a name for a project I have in mind. Sir, I have found that name!"

His monocle glittered compellingly at me.

"The iron is hot," said Lord Pollexfen. "Will you please tell your friend Mr. Raffles that I should like to discuss with him immediately the launching of a magazine—a monthly magazine of the highest class—a magazine, edited by himself, to be called *A. J. Raffles' Magazine of Sport.*"

To cricketers the world over, the Long Room at Lord's is little short of a shrine. And it was in this historic chamber, with the sunshine from its open windows mellow on panelled walls and priceless trophies, that the foundations of *Raffles' Magazine* were laid.

He himself determined my own role in the project. Keen of face, his dark hair crisp, his blazer and muffler sporting the colours of the noted I Zingari Club, he put a hand on my shoulder.

"I'd like to point out, Lord Pollexfen," he said, "that my friend here, Bunny Manders, is himself a skilful journalist. While I'm prepared to figure as Editor of the proposed magazine, my sporting engagements occupy most of my time. I should need the practical conduct of the magazine, under my general guidance as regards policy, to be in capable hands—and I can think of no more capable Assistant Editor than Bunny Manders here. How d'you feel about that, Bunny?"

It was true that, on Raffles'

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advice, I dabbled in freelance journalism as a cover for the more lucrative activities in which I was his confederate.

"I shall be happy to co-operate," I said.

To this, Lord Pollexfen made no objection, and he proceeded to suggest that an honorarium for Raffles would be appropriate, and for my own services an emolument in the nature of a salary. Though delicately enough phrased, the actual sums mentioned by the Press baron were nothing to write home about, but Raffles accepted them with casual inconsequence.

When the peer had gone off to arrange about office space and staff for us in the Pollexfen Press Building in Covent Garden, I said that I felt we might have made a better bargain.

"Why strain at sprats, Bunny," Raffles said, "when there may be mackerel in the offing?"

"You have some idea, Raffles?"

"That depends, Bunny."

"On what?"

"On the girl who threw the bomb. You heard what she was shouting about. It may have possibilities." Raffles' grey eyes danced as he offered me a Sullivan from his cigarette-case. "She'll be up in front of the magistrate at Marlborough Street to-morrow morning. We'll be there."

In addition to her honey-coloured hair, the girl in the dock at Marlborough Street Magistrates' Court next morning proved to have other attractions. She had spent the night in a cell, but evidently someone, possibly her solicitor, had wisely brought her more appropriate attire in which to appear before the magistrate than the trousers she had worn at Lord's.

Her name was Mirabel Renny, and she was a fine figure of a girl, standing there in the dock, though her proud bearing and defiant expression were at variance with the moving plea which her solicitor, quite a young man, made on her behalf.

"My client, Your Honour," he said, "as the only girl in a family dominated by her father and five large, athletic brothers, naturally occupied a subordinate place. As Your Honour is doubtless aware, pernicious literature about the social and political status of the female sex has been filtering into this country from the United States. Some of it chanced to fall into the hands of my client, who, in her girlish simplicity, was so unduly moved by it as to leave her country home and come to London. Here she lodged at a

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Ladies' Hostel in Fulham, where she fell in with some elder persons of her sex who likewise had been infected by these imported fallacies."

The girl opened her mouth, as though about to rebut her own solicitor's statement, but the young lawyer continued hastily, to forestall her.

"No doubt in a pathetic attempt to emulate her brothers' athletic prowess," he said, "my client has acquired, Your Honour, a taste and aptitude for outdoor pastimes—golf, croquet, tennis, archery, horseback-riding, to name but a few. Taking advantage of these admittedly hoydenish proclivities of my client, the elder persons at the Ladies' Hostel prevailed upon her to be the instrument of yesterday's lamentable demonstration at Lord's Cricket Ground—a demonstration which she now deeply regrets."

I saw the girl's hands, lightly sun-tanned, clench hard on the rail of the dock. Again she opened her mouth, but her solicitor hastened on.

"If Your Honour pleases," he said, "any actual damage to the turf at Lord's, the immemorial headquarters of our summer game, would have been viewed with repugnance by my client, with her sporting inclinations, however little they may become her in other respects. Indeed, as Inspector Harrigan has stated in evidence, the bomb-casing could not possibly have been fragmented by the detonation of its contents, consisting as these did merely of small fireworks—Chinese crackers or squibs."

This was news to Raffles and myself, who had arrived while the hearing was in progress, and we exchanged a surprised glance.

"In view of the fact, Your Honour," pleaded the solicitor, "that the bomb was designed only as a means of attracting attention, and that my client now bitterly regrets the incident, I ask Your Honour to exercise leniency in this case."

The magistrate, after addressing some stern remarks to the defendant in the dock, said, "The fine will be ten guineas, with two guineas costs. Next case!"

"Come on, Bunny," said Raffles.

To my astonishment, he sought out the functionary who collected fines and paid the girl's fine. As he returned his wallet to his pocket, Miss Mirabel Renny and her attendant solicitor came to the desk, and the functionary, indicating Raffles, said that the fine had been paid.

Though Raffles was now wearing an immaculate town

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suit, with a pearl in his cravat, the girl immediately recognized him.

"Why, you're the man who was batting at Lord's when I—" She broke off. Her fine eyes flashed. "How dare you," she said hotly, "presume to pay my fine? I'm not in need of charity from *men!*"

"No charity is involved," Raffles assured her. "The amount will be deducted from your first month's salary."

"Salary?" she exclaimed. "What d'you mean? What are you talking about?"

"The post of Contributing Editor on a magazine now in the fruitful planning stage," said Raffles. "If such a post, with the opportunity it provides for the dissemination of opinion, should happen to appeal to you, Miss Renny—"

No question about it. She jumped at it. And, as the next few weeks proved, Raffles could not have made a happier choice of young sportswoman to help in carrying out the editorial policy on which he had decided.

As he explained to Mirabel Renny and myself, before he went off to join cricketing house parties at some of the stately homes of the country, "Sport is in the English blood—which biologically, as far as I know, is no different in women from what it is in men. So we want to produce a well-balanced magazine which will equitably represent the interests and views of those of both sexes who have a taste for active pastimes."

Mirabel's enthusiasm knew no bounds. She threw herself heart and soul into executing the role he assigned to her. She was a dynamo of activity. Our office in the Pollexfen Press Building looked out on Covent Garden, from which rose the clip-clopping hoofbeats of the horses drawing tumbrils ablaze with flowers, while market porters bustled about with tall, round towers of fruit-baskets balanced on their heads, in the sunshine of a perfect summer.

We were untroubled by Lord Pollexfen, as Raffles had insisted on full editorial control. Raffles himself was active in the background on our behalf and, thanks to his influence, marvellous literary material came in, for merely token fees, from some of the greatest names in the world of sport.

What with this, and with Mirabel's aptitude and energy, my own task in putting together our first issue was far from onerous. Usually, at about noon, I would suggest that I take her to lunch, for she looked charming in the blue skirt and white shirtwaist, crisp and businesslike, which

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she wore to the office. But it was rarely that she would leave her work.

"You go ahead, Mr. Manders," she said. "I shall just have a sandwich and a cigarette."

She made out that she smoked Sullivans, like Raffles, but I knew this was just a gesture of emancipation, as cigarettes made her cough. But I would leave her to it and saunter across the Strand, bustling with hansoms in the sunshine, for a leisurely lunch and a few rubbers of whist at my club in the Adelphi, dropping back to the office at about four o'clock for a last supervisory look round before returning to my Mount Street flat to take a tub and dress for dinner. It was not a bad life, the editorial life.

I sent Raffles a card, care of the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, whose guest he was while playing cricket there, to let him know when the foundry proofs, the final proofs of our first issue fully made-up, were due from the printers, the McWhirter Printing & Engraving Company, in Long Acre. He turned up, looking tanned and fit, the same morning as the proofs arrived and was very pleased with them.

"A great job, Bunny! You and Mirabel have done wonders. Our first issue's a corker. It'll open a new era in sporting journalism."

There was a knock on the door. Lord Pollexfen strode in.

"Ah, good morning, Raffles," he said. "Good morning, Manders. Mr. McWhirter, the Master Printer, tells me he's delivered your foundry proofs. I'd like a look at them before deciding how many thousands of copies to venture on as a printing order."

Raffles handed him the proofs, and I offered him a sherry-and-bitters, which Raffles and I were drinking as a mid-morning refreshment. The peer shook his head, pushed his silk hat to the back of it, and, still standing, screwed his monocle into his eye to examine the proofs.

"A splendid Contents page, gentlemen," he said. "Such names! John L. Sullivan—Lord Lonsdale of the Lonsdale Belts—Sir Harry Preston on the subject of Tod Sloan, the great jockey—Vardon on golf—Prince Ranjisinjhi on tiger-shooting! Excellent! Outstanding!"

"We owe those contributions to our Editor," I said, indicating Raffles, who was sitting on the edge of my desk, swinging a leg idly.

"I foresaw something of this, of course, when I approached

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him," said the Press baron. "I knew what I was doing. I always do." He turned the pages. His smile faded. "What's this? What are these interpolated effusions by *women?*"

"Those are articles," Raffles said, "obtained by our Contributing Editor from various eminent ladies with active tastes."

"But good God, man! John L. Sullivan's article on boxing followed by some female whining about the exclusion of her sex from witnessing the bouts staged at the National Sporting Club? This is monstrously out of place, Raffles!"

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, Pollexfen," said Raffles.

"And here again—the great Harry Vardon on golf immediately followed by some woman bleating about the need for a more socially acceptable kind of garment as a first step to eradicating the insult to her sex in their being obliged to drive off more favoured tees than the men. What provocative nonsense! What does the idiotic woman mean—'a more socially acceptable kind of garment'?"

"It's shown there in the illustrations," Raffles said. "One illustration depicts the hampering effect on the golf swing of ankle-length skirt and petticoats in a high wind. The contrasting illustration shows the healthful freedom, both physical and psychological, provided by a garment, a form of trousering, specially designed by our own Contributing Editor."

"This disgraceful illustration," the peer said angrily, "appears to have been posed for by that young woman in the other office. I've seen her before somewhere. Isn't she the one who threw the bomb at Lord's?"

"Indeed yes," said Raffles. Our Contributing Editor."

Lord Pollexfen threw the proof down on my desk. "I will *not* publish a magazine polluted through and through with this kind of subversive stuff. It's entirely contrary to the policy of the Pollexfen Press, which is to keep women contented in their homes. I'm deeply disappointed, Raffles. This issue will have to be re-made, omitting the offensive material. And call that young woman in. I intend to dismiss her instantly."

"I'm sorry, Pollexfen," Raffles said quietly. "*I* engaged Miss Renny. As a matter of principle, I will neither dismiss her nor alter one word of this first issue of my magazine."

"Then, by God, you must look elsewhere for a publisher!"

"In that case, Manders and I will publish the magazine from our own resources. Shall we not, Bunny?"

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"Certainly, Raffles," I said, wondering uneasily what resources he was talking about, as we both were overdrawn at the bank.

"I warn you," said the Press peer, glaring haughtily through his monocle. "A. J. Raffles is not the only name to conjure with on the sports horizon. I shall seek a superior name for my sports magazine—and use the entire financial resources of the Pollexfen Press to crush any amateurish attempt at a rival publication."

"That is your privilege," Raffles said courteously.

"I also decline," barked the peer, "to be responsible for expenses incurred to date, including McWhirter's bill, and I shall require vacant possession of this office by six p.m. today."

He stalked out, slamming the door.

Raffles chuckled. "In chivalric terms, Bunny, there goes a male rampant, mounted on a prejudice, in a field ensanguined. Of course, this was inevitable."

"You expected it?" I said, astonished.

"I counted on it, Bunny." He offered me a cigarette from his case. "Well, now, first things first. We're without premises. We're overdrawn at the bank, but the manager's a cricketer and a good friend. He won't mind our using the bank as an accommodation address. Got a pencil handy? Take down this announcement."

Lighting my cigarette and his own, he paced the room thoughtfully.

" 'Owing,' " he dictated, " 'to the refusal of the original publisher to permit the expression of female opinion, and therefore withdrawing financial support, prospective contributors to *A. J. Raffles' Magazine*, which hopes soon to publish under less prejudiced auspices, are notified that unsolicited contributions should be submitted to The Editor, *Raffles' Magazine*, care of County and Confidential Bank, Berkeley Square, London, accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return if unsuitable.' That's the conventional wording, I think, Bunny?"

"Well, more or less," I said.

"Good," said Raffles. "Run it in the Personal columns of all evening and daily newspapers till further notice. Now, another thing: as eligible bachelors, we both get plenty of invitations to dine out—"

"You in the best houses," I said, "myself at the second best."

"Comparisons are invidious," said Raffles. "Accept all the invitations you get. I shall do the

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same. And we owe no duty to Pollexfen, so there's no need to make it a secret, in mixed company, that we've parted from him, and the reason for it, and are trying to get out the magazine by using our private means. Now, let's call Mirabel in and see if she's prepared to stand by us in this crisis."

One flash from Mirabel's eyes, when she heard that we were now to go it alone, made it plain where she stood. So, for better or worse, I rented a bleak little office for us just off Drury Lane.

Money being tight, I was glad enough to dine out frequently, and it seemed to me, when I recounted our trouble with Lord Pollexfen, that the mirth of the men at the table was offensively raucous, but that some of the ladies looked at me sympathetically as they withdrew to the drawing-room and whatever ladies talk about there, and left us men to our port.

My leg was pulled unmercifully by some of these hearties, but my real worry was the Master Printer, Mr. McWhirter. We were in a galling position. We had a fine magazine made up and ready to print, but there was not a hope of a single copy coming off the presses of that canny Scotsman until his bill for services to date was paid.

"We shall have to call on somebody, Bunny," Raffles said.

"Who, for instance?" I asked gloomily.

"A certain barrister who's a member of one of my clubs, Bunny. His name's Sir Geoffrey Cullimore, K.C. He's a blustering brute who makes at least fifty thousand a year by reducing men to jelly in the witness-box, and women to tears."

"Then what's the use of calling on a man like that?" I said.

Raffles gave me a wicked look. "His wife has a valuable necklace, Bunny."

My heart lurched.

The Cullimore mansion was in Eaton Square, and Raffles, masked, shinned up the porch pillar to pay his call, by way of the window of the master bedroom, at two a.m. on a moonless night. I myself waited below on the porch ready to reel out, in evening-dress and opera hat, and, enacting the role of a gentleman who had dined too extensively, confuse with maudlin inquiries the bobby on the beat if he should make an inopportune appearance.

Fortunately, he did not show up at all, and when Raffles rejoined me, removing his mask, he had the necklace-case in his pocket.

"It's locked," he told me. "I'll

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pick the lock at Kern's place."

Ivor Kern, the fence we did business with, a young-old man with a perpetual, cynical half-smile, had an antique shop in King's Road, which was not far off. Under the flaring gaslight in Kern's cluttered sitting-room over the shop, Raffles picked the lock of the necklace-case and threw it open.

It was empty.

Raffles was as shocked as I was, but Kern's smirk widened.

" 'Emmeline Cullimore,' " he said, reading the name embossed on the leather necklace-case. "Well, as it happens, *I* can tell you where that necklace is. It's just across the road in the very secure safe of a pawnbroker friend of mine."

"How d'you know?" Raffles said grimly.

"Because jewellery offered to him in pledge," Kern said, "he usually brings over to me for an expert valuation before making an advance. A lady wanted to pledge a necklace with him this morning. She wore a veil and said her name was Doris Stevens, but he recognized her because she lives nearby, in Eaton Square. She was Lady Cullimore. I valued the necklace at two-thousand-and-seventy pounds. He gives ten per cent of value on pledges, so he let her have two-hundred-and-seven pounds on it. Bad luck, Raffles—you can't win every time."

We parted in silence, I to my flat in Mount Street, Raffles to his set of rooms in The Albany, just off Piccadilly.

To my surprise, he showed up at the office in Drury Lane next morning, and seemed to be in very good spirits.

"I have news for you, Bunny," he said, as he poured himself a sherry-and-bitters. "I dropped in at the bank on my way here. Yesterday afternoon, just before closing-time, a lady made a deposit to the credit of *A. J. Raffles' Magazine.* She wore a veil, and signed the paying-in slip in the name of Doris Stevens. It was a cash deposit, in five-pound notes, with two sovereigns, of exactly two-hundred-and-seven pounds."

"Good God!" I said. "What d'you make of this, Raffles?"

His grey eyes danced. "One wonders, Bunny." He took out his wallet. "I cashed a cheque for a hundred for incidental expenses—to keep our announcement running in the Personal columns, and to pay Mirabel's salary, and so on, with a little ready money for ourselves. We shan't need much, as we're dining out so frequently nowadays."

I accepted my share, and was glad of it. But the McWhirter problem remained. He was

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badgering for his bill to be paid, and it obviously was quite useless to offer him, on account, the mere £107 remaining to the magazine's credit, and expect him to print thousands and thousands of copies of our first issue on the strength of it.

I pointed this out to Raffles one morning about a week after the curious incident of the veiled lady.

He nodded regretfully. "We're stymied, Bunny. The only thing we can do is go and see Lord Pollexfen. It's no use prevaricating. We must be realistic. Come on, let's go and take our medicine."

"A damned bitter draught," I said, as we put on our hats and walked round to Covent Garden, ablaze with the flower-barrows in the lovely sunshine. "If he *does* agree to take over the magazine again, it'll be on his conditions—no female opinion, Mirabel to be sacked."

Significantly, we were kept waiting for some time in the ante-chamber of the Pollexfen Press Building before we were admitted to Lord Pollexfen's sanctum, which was almost as large as the Long Room at Lord's.

The peer, without rising from his massive desk or inviting us to be seated, screwed his monocle into his eye.

"Well?" he said haughtily.

"I hear rumours in Fleet Street," Raffles said, "that you're going ahead with your plans for a sports magazine."

"I informed you of my intention of doing so. I've found a suitable name for its bannerhead. What I say I will do, Raffles, I *do*."

"Frankly, Pollexfen," Raffles said, "we've run into certain difficulties—McWhirter and one thing and another. We've found the business side of producing a magazine a considerable encroachment on our time and —candidly—on our personal resources."

"I warned you," the peer said coldly. "Publishing is not for amateurs. If you're here to seek a return to our former relationship, I'm not interested. My alternative plans are afoot. Now, if that's all—"

"You expressed some interest," Raffles said quickly, "in the literary material I obtained from personal acquaintances—Mr. John L. Sullivan —Prince Ranjisinjhi—"

The peer, his monocle fixedly regarding Raffles, withdrew his hand slowly from the bell on his desk.

"I could, I think," Raffles said, "persuade those gentlemen, as a personal favour to me, to allow the transfer of their material to your own magazine, if you—oh, the

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devil! Manders and I aren't business men. We've sunk more than we can afford into the magazine. If you'd care to consider acquiring its literary assets for a reasonable sum—"

"What d'you call a reasonable sum?" snapped the peer.

"Well, if you'd take over McWhirter's bill to date," Raffles said, "and—well, we'd like to get back a crumb or two of what we've spent. We could, of course, go to the City for finance—I have friends there—if we decide we *must* go on with our magazine. But—"

"It interferes with your hedonistic way of life," Lord Pollexfen said sarcastically.

Raffles shrugged. "I don't know what we have left of the funds we personally put into the magazine's bank account, Pollexfen, but if you care to pay a sum equal to the current balance, you can take over the magazine's literary assets and all the work done so far—lock, stock, and barrel—and we'll be free of the whole thing," he added, with a gesture of weary disgust.

The Press baron hesitated. But he knew our present balance could not possibly be greater than the amount of McWhirter's bill, and he said, with abrupt decision, "Very well. I'll do that. Naturally, I shall require your bank manager to vouch for the amount currently standing to your magazine's credit."

"Won't you take my word for it?" Raffles said coldly.

"I'm afraid not." The peer struck a bell on his desk. The door opened. "Call my brougham," said the peer, with hauteur. "Where's your bank, Raffles?"

"In Berkeley Square."

"Then let's get the matter over and done with."

As, to the clip-clopping of the horse, the three of us rode in the brougham through the turmoil of the sunny streets, I knew Raffles must be inwardly raging, as I was myself. If only Lord Pollexfen had accepted Raffles' word for what stood to the magazine's credit, then Raffles might have named a reasonably substantial sum. As it was, we were about to be humiliated, and the Press peer's whole attitude betrayed his awareness of the fact.

"This is Lord Pollexfen," Raffles told the bank manager, when we were shown into his office. "He's acquiring the literary assets and so forth of *Raffles' Magazine,* Mr. Harper, for a sum equal to the magazine account's present balance—are you not, Pollexfen?"

"That is the agreement," the peer said haughtily.

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"I can tell you the balance in a trice," said the bank manager, opening a large ledger.

I could have told him in less than a trice. Our balance was £107.

"At the conclusion of yesterday's business," said the manager, running a finger down the page, "the sum standing to the credit of *A. J. Raffles' Magazine of Sport* was precisely seven-thousand-five-hundred pounds, sixteen shillings and—"

My knees felt weak. The room spun round me. There seemed to be long silence. Then there was a scratching sound. It was made by Lord Pollexfen's pen. He was writing a cheque. He tore it out and threw it on the desk.

At the door, he turned, lean and tall, his monocle icily glittering.

"The name of A. J. Raffles," he said, "will never again be mentioned in any periodical published by the Pollexfen Press."

The door slammed.

A few minutes later, as Raffles and I were leaving the bank, I noticed a heavily veiled lady at the counter. Raffles gripped my arm, checking me. The lady pushed a sheaf of banknotes across the mahogany to the attentive clerk.

"To be placed," said the veiled lady, in a voice so low, almost furtive, as scarcely to be audible, "to the credit of *A. J. Raffles' Magazine*."

We walked on out into the sunshine.

That night, we took Mirabel Renny and a friend of hers called Margaret, a fine, forthright type of girl, like Mirabel herself, to dine at Frascati's palatial restaurant in Oxford Street.

"I'm afraid, Mirabel," Raffles said, as the wine waiter brought champagne bottles in a silver ice-bucket to our table, "that you won't be entirely pleased by the reason for this dinner. Perhaps we'd better admit the truth right away. The fact is, we've sold the magazine."

"*Sold* it?" she said incredulously.

"For seven-thousand-five-hundred pounds," Raffles said. "To Lord Pollexfen."

"Pollexfen? But—but that means—"

"It means you're sacked, I'm sorry to say," Raffles admitted. "So this cheque I'm handing you is—in lieu of notice."

Mirabel's fine eyes flashed. "*Men!*" she said. "I might have known this would happen, Margaret. The moment things get difficult, men think only of themselves. They're selfish, through and—" She looked

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again at the cheque. "But—but this is for *seven-thousand-six-hundred pounds!*"

"Bunny and I owed the magazine account a hundred," Raffles explained. "I've already apologised to Bunny for omitting to tell him that I've kept in close touch with the bank all along regarding the state of the magazine's account."

"The privilege of an Editor-in-Chief," I said, a shade wryly.

"But, of course," said Raffles, "Bunny shares equally with me the seven-thousand-five-hundred from Pollexfen—which has nothing whatever to do with this cheque, Mirabel. This money came from other sources. What marital injustices or male insensitivities may explain this money, I just don't know. But you need have no hesitation in using it to start a magazine of your own, Mirabel, to further the Cause you have at heart. This money came entirely from women—unknown women in this country, Mirabel—that their voice, at last, may be heard in the land."

She gazed at him. She blinked. Sudden tears came into her eyes.

They were the tears of sheer, incredulous happiness, but Raffles, embarrassed by them, quickly unwired a champagne bottle. The cork popped.

"We must admit," he said, as he poured the bubbly fizzing into our glasses, "that we owe much to Mr. John L. Sullivan, Prince Ranjisinjhi, and those other great names who provided priceless literary material. But let's drink now, above all, to those anonymous others, those nameless ones who so hopefully submitted," said A. J. Raffles, raising his glass, *"unsolicited contributions!"*

Historical Note

Though Mr. Manders' account of the above adventure makes no mention of the fact, it may be of journalistic interest to note that Lord Pollexfen's plans for a sports magazine excluding the name of A. J. Raffles were forestalled shortly thereafter by the appearance, from a rival publishing house, of *C. B. Fry's Magazine of Sport*, which flourished in the golden years of the Edwardian heyday.

Mr. C. B. Fry, perhaps the most famous of A. J. Raffles' cricketing contemporaries, and also at that

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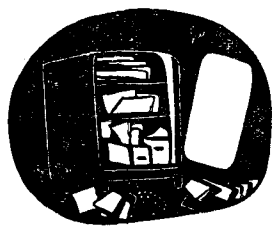
time holder of the world's record for the broad jump, was ably assisted in his Editorship by young Mr. Bertram Atkey, whose later tales of the Exploits of Winnie O'Wynn, long-running in *The Saturday Evening Post* of the 1920's, were dramatized by the eminent actor, Mr. William Gillette, the theatre's greatest Sherlock Holmes.

And finally, Barry Perowne's real name is Philip Atkey, and Philip Atkey-Barry Perowne is Bertram Atkey's nephew.



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introducing a *NEW* character

created by

LAWRENCE TREAT

Introducing Patrolman Greg Sennet of the Seventeenth Precinct, an ambitious cop who wanted to do more than pound a beat. And one snowy night, while he was moonlighting as a cab driver, he had the feeling his luck had turned—the night he picked up the golden-eyed girl in the white mink coat. . .

IN VINO VERITAS

by LAWRENCE TREAT

After three years as a cop he was still a patrolman and he knew why. The way to get promoted was to have somebody looking out for you—somebody with political clout who could go to the Commissioner and say, "This guy Sennet, he's just a patrolman, but he's on his way up, if you know what I mean."

Greg didn't have anyone like that. Hook, uncle, rabbi—your protector goes by different names in different police departments all over the country, and he's better than ten citations. Ten? Greg didn't even have one. And the only time he'd helped in solving a case, a detective from Homicide East took the information and grabbed the credit.

Still, Greg believed in his luck. Someday he was going to save a politico's life or rescue his daughter or maybe just save his favorite pet, and the grateful reward would be a promotion.

So Greg had his dreams and they kept him going. They stayed with him while he walked his beat and while he moonlighted at the wheel of a cab, and they were honed by a keen eye and a quick intelligence. And he thought he heard the knock of opportunity when he picked up the golden-eyed girl in a white mink coat and a

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white mink hat one snowy evening when people were fighting for cabs. He spotted her when he dropped his fare and a half dozen people grabbed at the door of his hack and tried to get in.

He snapped at them angrily. "Lay off," he said. "This is my cab and I'm taking her. *Her*—she was here first." When his words weren't getting him anywhere, he grabbed the heavy wrench he always kept next to him, just in case, and waved it menacingly. "You hear me?" he said.

The knot of would-be passengers backed off and the golden-eyed girl walked majestically to the open door of the hack and sat down inside, as a queen would take her throne. "Why, thank you," she said in a clear, bell-like voice. "That was nice of you. Would you take me to the Club Prado?"

He would and he did, although it was too short a ride to have much of a conversation with her. But when he got there and the doorman opened the door, she said, "Frank, would you take care of the cab for me? And give him something extra—he deserves it."

The doorman nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Correll." And he handed Greg a five-dollar bill.

"That's Mrs. Correll?" Greg said. "The wife of the owner?"

"That's right. Some dame, isn't she?"

She was, but in exactly which way was arguable. As Greg told himself a little later, golden eyes were glamorous and they sparkled and glinted in the light, but they had the cold metallic sheen of what is bought and sold in the marketplace.

Cops' minds work that way. They note the razzle-dazzle and they ask questions about what's behind it. They fall for women, but they fall where they want to, as an axeman angles his tree.

But Greg wasn't philosophizing on that snowy evening in front of the Club Prado. He was driving a hack and bent on piling up the dough for himself and his cherished bride, waiting for him in the snug two-room apartment they called home.

Still, he had a feeling about golden-eyes and the Club Prado. The mayor went there, a lot of city big wigs went there, and probably the Governor and a few senators, too. But the local politicians were the ones who interested Greg, and he felt he had a toe inside the door that led to the stairway going up. Lady Correll was his luck, his karma and kismet. He had a hunch and he rode it—which was why he parked at the cabstand near the Club Prado whenever he could. Even on a

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morning like this, at 10:00 a.m. when the club wasn't even open. And he'd sat here for a half hour and watched the staff troop in through the side door.

He ticked them off as well as he could. Waiters, busboys, kitchen help. Chefs, business staff. And finally Lou Correll himself, who was reputed to know 20,000 people by their first names. And Greg stayed where he was, across the street, aware that nobody was likely to come out the front door this early in the morning and ask for a cab. Nevertheless he was unwilling either to go cruising or to tell himself why he didn't.

Then the restaurant door opened and the two drunks came out.

At first it was hard to tell whether they staggered because they were blotto or because they'd been thrown out, but it didn't matter. What bothered Greg was the reason why they were here in the first place. Since the Prado didn't open until noon, why would a pair of drunks come reeling out at this hour?

Still, there they were, and Greg watched them weave uncertainly across the street and approach his cab. Alongside it they grabbed at the door handle to steady themselves. The bigger of the pair lurched forward and stared, as if he'd just killed his best friend and the acid fumes of conscience were beginning to bite. Then some inner curtain seemed to click shut. He gave an empty snort, jerked back, and yanked the door open.

The two men seemed to trip over each other before they managed to pile in smelling of alcohol and stumbling and floundering. But once inside they straightened up, and the voice that told Greg to drive to the Hotel Commodore was steady, and he heard enough of the conversation in back to set him wondering.

"Well, we got out of there nicely. They swallowed that story. Even if they have doubts about it later on, so what?" And the smaller man laughed.

The bigger one saw nothing funny. "We got out, but what did we accomplish? We don't even know who's going to get—"

"Shut up. Want *him* to hear?"

Greg, glancing into the rear-view mirror, saw the smaller man pointing. At him. Greg, the driver.

So somebody, or rather a pair of somebodies, had "got out of there nicely," but were wondering just what they'd accomplished. And the somebodies sat in Greg's cab and talked in low voices, while they

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smoothed their jackets, straightened their ties, and tidied themselves up. When they reached the hotel and stepped out of the taxi, they looked like a couple of respectable businessmen, indistinguishable from the hundreds who would walk in and out of the same revolving doors.

Greg drove a few feet from the hotel entrance, parked double, and stepped out of his cab. He got inside the hotel just in time to see the two men pick up a key at the desk and head for an elevator. He waited until they were out of sight. Then he walked up to the counter and spoke to the room clerk.

"The pair who just went up," he said. "What are their names?"

"I can't tell you anything like that. I—"

Greg took out his badge and his identification. "Sennet, police," he said. "Just tell me their names."

"Oh." The clerk gave two quick compulsive jerks of his head, went over to a card index, and consulted it. He returned with the information. "E. L. Bezanson and R. Krikor," he said. "They are registered from Hong Kong, but I don't believe they're Chinese."

Greg repressed a grin. "Thanks," he said. "Neither do I."

At the wheel of his cab he thought things over. He was pretty sure he was onto something—but what? You can't hold a couple of men because they pretend to be drunk, and yet their behavior was suspicious enough to be looked into. If they'd stolent something—a painting, an incriminating photograph. If they'd hidden a bomb or planted some evidence. If there was a complaint. If—if—if.

If he could somehow find out and do the owner of the Club Prado a favor and then be asked what could be done to thank him, Greg had his answer ready. "The Commissioner eats here, he's a friend of yours. Just let him know I'm due for a promotion."

So—E. L. Bezanson and R. Krikor: odd names. Who were they, and why had they pulled their act at the night club?

He got part of the answer by making a phone call to the F.B.I. It took a bit of persuading to pry out the information that the F.B.I. were familiar with the names, which were aliases for a pair of paid terrorists. The F.B.I. had been watching them, but had lost them a few days ago.

"They're registered at the Hotel Commodore," Greg said. "Or were."

He returned to the Club

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Prado and arrived at the start of the crowded lunch hour. You could tell who the regular customers were by the way they shouted at each other across the lobby or from opposite ends of the bar. Beyond the bar, in the big dining room, voices had settled down to a machinelike hum. Greg, standing in the lobby, felt awkward and out of place. It was no trick for the majordomo, sitting at an office desk and checking off pink slips, to spot Greg as someone who didn't belong. Nevertheless the majordomo's voice purred with politeness.

"You have a reservation?"

Greg shook his head. "No reservation." He took out his badge and held it in the palm of his hand. "Sennet, police," he said. "Would you tell Mr. Correll I'd like to talk to him?"

"I'll see if I can locate him," the majordomo said. He picked up his phone, dialed, spoke briefly, then nodded to Greg. "Mr. Correll will be right down. If you'll wait here?"

The man who descended the staircase from the upstairs dining room was tall and gaunt, and his dyed black mustache looked as if it had been hammered on. It was hard for Greg to realize that this human scaffolding was married to the golden-eyed girl, but Greg told himself that money can do a lot of things. And both ways, give and take.

The skin-and-bones man walked up to Greg and said, "I'm Lou Correll. You wanted to see me about something?"

"About the two drunks who came out of here this morning. What happened? Who were they?"

"I don't know. They managed to hide when the place was cleared last night, even though the watchman claims he checked up and that they weren't in the building. But they were here this morning. Leaning up against the bar. Drunk. With a couple of empty whiskey bottles next to them."

"What did you do?"

"Oh, I checked thoroughly. I had my staff go through the house to see if anything was taken or disturbed. I checked my safe and all the mementoes that might be valuable. Nothing seemed to be missing, and that pair could hardly stand up, much less talk, so I had them thrown out. Why do you ask? Has something happened?"

"No, but they weren't drunk. They probably spilled some whiskey over themselves so they'd have the right smell, and then they put on their act. I drove them over to their hotel, and they were no more drunk than you or I."

"Then why—"

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"Mr. Correll, I don't know why they were here or what they did, but the F.B.I. is interested in them. Apparently they're well-known terrorists."

Correll's gray skin seemed to go patchy. "You don't think—I mean—what would they be doing here? What are you telling me?"

"I don't know. The first thing that hits me is, with the customers you have here, people of importance and influence, this would be a pretty good place to plant a bomb. If you want to play it safe and let the bomb squad check up, that might be a sensible precaution."

"Precaution?" Correll's voice rose to a squeak. "Do you have any reason for thinking there's any danger? It seems to me that this wild idea of yours has no foundation whatsoever. And do you realize the bad publicity it would bring? Scaring everybody, bringing in the police—why? What for? Nobody would come here any more, they'd be afraid. I think you're crazy."

"Just trying to do you a favor," Greg said.

"I assure you it's no favor. Maybe your motives were of the best, but your judgment is deplorable."

"Sorry," Greg said.

"Sorry?" Then Correll noticed that people were listening, so he lowered his voice, planing it down to a level of quiet control. "I have nothing against you, no hard feelings. In fact, if you'd care to stay here for lunch, as my guest—"

"No, thanks," Greg said. "Maybe some other time, with my wife."

"Of course. Well—perhaps you'd like to look over our operation? You've heard of our wine cellar? It's world-famous. William will be glad to show it to you. William!"

William approached with a patter of steps and came full stop, snugging down his red jacket in lieu of salute. "William," Correll said, "I'd like you to show Mr. Sennet our cellars." And with a nod of relief Correll left quickly.

So much, Greg thought, for my promotion. I'm palmed off on William, who will give me the tourist tour as fast as he can because I don't look like a heavy tipper. He has instincts developed in his trade, same as I do in mine.

William covered the territory efficiently and gave his spiel from memory. The kitchens down in the cellar, spotlessly clean and gleaming in stainless steel. Organized on an assembly line, yet with everything cooked to order. The subcellar, where food was prepared for the chefs upstairs. Off to the

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left, racks of supplies and shelves—endless shelves filled with jars, cans, boxes. Then a couple of steps leading to a blank stone wall. There William paused.

"You know what this is for?" he said.

"Looks like a wall to me."

"Ain't no wall. It's a door. Know how to get in?"

Greg played the straight man. "No. How?"

"Needs a magic quarter. You got a quarter?"

"Sure." Greg rummaged through his pocket, found a quarter, and handed it to William. Greg watched him count to the ninth jar on the third shelf from the floor, lift the jar, and insert the quarter in a slot underneath. The heavy stone door, operated electrically, swung open. William returned Greg's coin.

"Here's your magic quarter," William said, grinning. "With a dividend." And he handed Greg a souvenir coin embossed with the name of the Club Prado.

"Dates back to prohibition days, doesn't it?" Greg said.

William nodded, reached inside the doorway, and pushed a switch that illuminated the entire expanse of the wine cellar. Each bin had a letter and a number, but William led the way to the end of the center row and pointed to shelves loaded with brandy and whiskey bottles, their familiar labels dusty and faded.

"That's our museum," he said. "Every bottle you see, it comes from the first year they made the brand. That one is a hundred and fifty years old. Look at the label. See?"

Greg saw without interest. He turned slowly and studied the wine bins. "Why numbers?" he said. "Why not just the name of the wine?"

"Because each bottle, it belongs to somebody. The regulars, the ones that eat upstairs, they all got their own wines stored here. Mr Pinner, he's the wine steward, he writes down which bottle belongs to who and then he puts it down in his book. He's got maybe a thousand names in that book."

"Yes," Greg said. He turned away, wandered to the next aisle, then the next where somebody had recently broken a bottle of wine. The contents were still trickling slowly toward the wall.

"William," Greg said, "come here and take a look at this."

William's quick little steps drummed on the concrete floor. He braked suddenly and practically skidded to a stop. "My goodness!" he said. "Never happened before. I better tell Mr. Pinner about it. He going to be awful mad."

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Strange, Greg reflected. It was obvious that Mr. Pinner didn't have time to come here personally every time someone ordered a bottle of wine, but it was equally certain that if any of his men had broken a bottle, he'd have cleaned up as soon as he could. In all likelihood someone else had dropped it.

Upstairs, Greg asked for Correll again, and while he waited, Greg reminded himself that you don't give a civilian any maybes, you don't hand him theories and possibilities. You speak with authority. You're the expert, you have to know with definiteness.

Correll seemed annoyed at seeing Greg again and his voice was sharp. "You wanted something?"

"I thought I'd tell you—no bomb."

"I'm glad to hear that," Correll said, still with an edge to his voice. "You're quite sure, of course?"

"Absolutely, because I know exactly where the two men were hiding and what they did. They spent the night inside your wine cellar."

"How could they get in?"

"Somebody must have taken William's wine-cellar tour and memorized where the switch was. Ninth jar on the third shelf from the bottom, and you put a quarter in the slot."

Correll rubbed a finger along the sagging flesh of his cheek. "But why hide? Why go there in the first place?"

"Let me ask you something. The book with the key to the coded bottles—where is it kept?"

"Mr. Pinner has it during the day. At night we lock it up in the safe."

"I see," Greg said. "That's why they didn't know who."

"What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Correll, that pair of so-called drunks managed to hide until the place was locked up. Then they went down to the wine cellar, or maybe they went there in the first place, and they stayed in there overnight, which is why the watchman never saw them. But they didn't go there just for fun. They went there to poison somebody's wine."

"You're sure? You know that? You mean—but whose? Which bottle?"

"I don't know, and they don't know themselves. When they found out the bins were coded, with no identifying names, they simply took a bottle at random and injected it. They apparently broke a bottle by mistake, but that's unimportant. Mr. Correll, someday somebody here is going to send for a bottle of wine, drink

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from it, and fall over dead."

Correll gasped. "No! Not here. Look—my clients—they're my friends—I know them by their first names—all of them. If one of them died, I'd be ruined. I'd have to close up."

"Just take it easy," Greg said. "We'll work it out."

"Take it easy? How can I? I'm going down there right now and I'll find that bottle if it takes me all week!"

"And better get a sample of the stuff that spilled and have it analyzed," Greg said.

"You bet," Correll said. "If that's the poisoned one, I'm okay."

Greg watched him stalk off and wondered how Correll could possibly identify one particular bottle. You strip off the foil, put a hypodermic through the cork, inject the poison, pull out the needle, put the foil back—and how can anybody tell the difference?

Greg walked off slowly, dejectedly, but the idea of a lethal bottle kept haunting him. Correll wouldn't find it—how could he? So somebody was bound to drink it sooner or later. You didn't know who or when, you couldn't locate the bottle, you couldn't even prove there was such a bottle. But Greg was sure of it nevertheless.

He took his problem to Pinner, the stocky balloon-cheeked wine steward, who made light of the possibility.

"I'll open every bottle I serve and sniff it," he said. "Anything wrong, if it's corky or sour or has some foreign matter in it, I'll catch it. I've got a nose for wine, that's why I have this job. With anything except quina wine or the Greek resin, I could tell right off. And the quina wine—that's the kind with quinine in it—you don't see it any more. Awful stuff, made for perverted palates."

Greg, however, was unconvinced. Just because Pinner said he could sniff and tell was no guarantee. Tragedy in the Club Prado was inevitable, and Greg found himself unable to stay away from the neighborhood. Besides, the fares were numerous, and they tipped well above the average.

Occasionally he picked up the golden-eyed girl, but she failed to recognize him. Although heads turned as she came out of the restaurant and walked over to the curb, she seemed unaware of anyone except herself.

On two occasions Greg drove her to a corner three blocks away, where she gave him a dollar tip, then crossed the street, and got into a waiting car. Greg couldn't see the driver, but from force of habit he noted and memorized the

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number on the license plate. Later, since he had a detective's insatiable curiosity, he checked up on the name of the owner—Alexander Andrylos. All of which added up to the fact that Mrs. Correll was having an affair and met her lover in the afternoon.

File and forget, Greg told himself, but he called the F.B.I. and asked whether they'd ever gotten hold of E. L. Bezanson and R. Krikor. He was told it was none of his business. When he stated they were witnesses in a homicide case he was investigating, he was told to speak to the agent in charge.

"Better forget about them," a laconic voice said. "They got killed in that propane explosion out in Illinois."

End of that possible line of inquiry, Greg told himself, and waited uncomfortably

It happened about a month later. Spring was in the air—one of those early spring days when a warm wind blows and you almost expect flowers to grow up in the middle of the street. Greg was patrolling his beat when a squad car from the Seventeenth Precinct pulled up and Cassidy called out to him.

"Hey, Greg, they want you over at the Club Prado."

"What for?"

"They didn't say. We just got the call that something broke there and they want you. That your new hangout?"

"I like their food," Greg said, straight-faced. "Where else can you get a good hamburger for ten bucks?"

They kidded around on the short drive to the restaurant, where the squad car deposited Greg. He walked in, feeling conspicuous and out of place. The majordomo hustled him over to William, who brought him upstairs at once, before any of the customers could get indigestion from the shock of seeing a uniformed policeman.

"What happened?" Greg asked William.

William's answer sputtered out, all in the space of a single long breath. "Somebody keeled over while eating and they carried him out and then everybody calmed down a little because the Commissioner of Police was right there in the middle of lunch and he went upstairs with Mr. Correll and they told me to bring you up as soon as you got here." He finally paused, although with reluctance. "That door," he said.

Greg knocked and was told to come in. Correll was officiating from behind a carved teak desk and the Commissioner and a couple of top brass were sitting in big upholstered chairs. The console bar was open, and ice, glasses, and a couple of

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bottles were spread out on it, but nobody was drinking.

"Sennet?" the Commissioner asked

Greg saluted. "Patrolman Sennet, Seventeenth."

"Sennet," the Commissioner said, "Mr. Correll has been telling me a rather strange story about a bottle of wine that must have been poisoned. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's hear your version."

Greg told him. "What set me thinking," he said, "was what the two men said in the cab One of them said they'd got out of it nicely and the other one that they hadn't accomplished much and didn't even know who was going to—and at that point he broke off and never finished the sentence. But when I was down in the wine cellar I put two and two together. It seemed a fair guess they'd been in the wine cellar and expected to find somebody's bottle and poison it, but they couldn't find the right one, so they just picked a bottle at random. I understand somebody died suddenly. May I ask who?"

"Man named Alexander Andrylos. Attached to the Greek consulate. Know any thing about him?"

The wheels began turning in Greg's mind. They started up slowly, as if they were hand-cranked, then built up momentum until his mind was spinning and his ideas tumbled out too fast to be weighed or evaluated. He knew he shouldn't have spoken so soon; he knew he should have waited and thought things through, instead of jumping to conclusions. But in his excitement he blurted out suspicions as if they were facts.

"Alexander Andrylos," he said. "I never met him, but I know a lot about him. In the first place I'm sure his death was no accident."

The Commissioner wasn't used to being talked to that way by a patrolman, and his voice vibrated with thunder.

"Just how do you know that?" he demanded.

"Because he was Mrs. Correll's lover, and he was murdered."

In the shocked silence that followed, Greg realized he'd gone too far. After all, what did he have to go on? Motive, opportunity—sure. Correll could identify Andrylos' wine by its code number—sure. And Correll as well as the wine steward knew that Greek resin wine would overpower any taste buds—sure. But what *proof* did he have?

Correll addressed himself to

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the Commissioner and used his first name. "Mark, I think this man is crazy. Why he thinks my wife has a lover, I don't know. But to use a guess like that as a basis for a wild accusation—that's beyond me. I think you'd better handle him—I wouldn't want to dirty my hands."

Greg felt the blood rush to his head and a tide of anger flood his veins. Then the door burst open and the golden-eyed girl rushed in. She was crying hysterically as she ran at her husband.

"He's dead—they just told me—and you killed him! That bottle of wine in your safe—you told me somebody put poison in it and you found it. You kept it, you said, to remember what a narrow escape somebody had, but you really kept it to use against Alex—you—"

Correll pushed her away. "You're losing control of yourself," he said calmly. "The bottle's still there, and I can show it to you." He turned to the Commissioner. "Mark, as soon as this officer told me about a poisoned bottle, I went down and looked. Just a matter of checking all the bottles that were easy to get out. That's how I found one that had been tampered with. The foil was loose. So I hope you'll forgive my wife for making a spectacle of herself. As for this officer's accusation—no substance to it. None at all."

"But I think there is," Greg said, and he gained confidence as the idea formed in his mind. "I think the proof's there. I think you'll find Mr. Correll's fingerprints on the poisoned bottle."

"Probably," Correll said. "I'm sure I touched it in all the excitement downstairs, but so did a lot of others."

"Right," Greg said. "There ought to be quite a few prints. The man who went to the wine cellar and took the bottle out of the bin, the one who brought it to the table, the one who opened it with a corkscrew—they all held it, but they all held it *near the bottom*. That's the way you usually hold a full bottle. But if you took the foil off in order to pierce the cork with a hypodermic syringe, you'd hold the bottle *by the neck*, to steady it. And besides, you'll find Mr. Correll's prints *under the foil*, which is all the proof you need. Mr. Commissioner, if you—" And Greg broke off, because he was too scared to finish his sentence.

Greg Sennet is now a detective, first grade, and they say the Commissioner has his eye on him. Not because Greg's that smart, although he's smart enough, but because he's lucky.

Very lucky.

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a *NEW* Ulysses S. Byrd story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Exploit Number 3 of Ulysses S. Byrd, con man, and an artist at his trade . . . Who is the easiest mark for a con man to con? Would you believe it's another con man? Why not? Confidence games thrive only on the victims' greed. And perhaps the con man himself is the greediest sucker of them all .

THE CREDIT CARD CAPER

by EDWARD D HOCH

Linda entered the office smiling, and Frank Dayton knew everything was all right. "A visitor," she announced in her best formal voice, because she'd left the door open behind her. "Mr. Ulysses S. Byrd."

"Fine! Send him right in!"

Frank Dayton was on his feet, holding out his hand, when Byrd entered the office. "Welcome to San Francisco, Mr. Byrd! Need I say that your fame has preceded you?"

"I'm surprised at that," he told Frank Dayton. Byrd was neither as young nor as handsome as he'd once been, but there was still a touch of the dapper gentleman about him. He did not look at all like a confidence man, which was why he made an especially good one. "I usually try not to advertise myself."

"Is that so? I understood you go so far as to leave a bird's feather for your victims."

"You know a great deal," Byrd said with a smile. "I do that on occasion, but usually when I know my marks are people not likely to go to the police."

"You mean other criminals."

"I don't consider myself a criminal," Byrd replied, but there was a touch of a smile about his lips. "Perhaps more of a chess player without a board."

"Well, yes." Frank Dayton cleared his throat. "Let's get down to business, shall we? I've

1974 by Edward D Hoch

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contacted you because they told me you were the best in the business for figuring out elaborate con games. I want to hire you—only this time you'll be working on the side of law and order."

"That will be a change."

Dayton tossed a small plastic card on the desk in front of Byrd. "Know what this is?"

Byrd picked up the card and studied it. "A credit card. Hardly an unusual sight these days."

"But this one is unusual. My company, Card Alarm, Inc., manufactures it. The card is impregnated with a strip of magnetic material on which is encoded the identity of the cardholder and the status of his account. The card is inserted into a computer terminal at each place of business, and within seconds authorization comes back from a central computer. If the card has been stolen, defaced, or changed in any way, or if the holder is simply a deadbeat, an alarm bell rings."

"That must be somewhat embarrassing to the customer."

"If he's trying to defraud someone he deserves to be embarrassed."

"That's true," Byrd agreed. "But where do I come in?"

"This system is foolproof from a purely physical standpoint. Quite a few banks and department stores are already using our cards here in California, and they're completely successful. But before we launch the cards in the rest of the country I want to make certain they're just as foolproof from a psychological standpoint. Mr. Byrd, my company is prepared to pay you ten thousand dollars if you can come up with a workable method of defrauding our system."

"That's an interesting offer," Byrd murmured.

"Isn't it? Good pay, easy work, and within the law. We figure if you can't find a way to cheat the Card Alarm system, no one can. And if you do find a way, we can take measures to guard against it."

"It may be a little out of my line." Byrd fingered the card, feeling the embossed letters and numbers. "But I'll give it a try. If I can't beat the system, you don't have to pay me."

Frank Dayton stood up and they shook hands. As he saw Byrd to the door he asked, "How long do you think it will take you?"

"Give me a week. If I can't do it by then, I can't do it at all."

"Where'll you be if I need to reach you?"

Byrd thought for a moment. "Try the Majestic Hotel. If I'm not there, they can reach me. But I'll check back with you

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next Monday, a week from today."

"Fine." Dayton held the door for him. "Good luck. My secretary Linda can supply you with any information you may need. Just call her. Our number's on this card."

Byrd smiled at the slim brunette behind the reception desk. "I might just do that."

After he'd gone, Linda said, "You know, Frank, he looks just like my dentist. He doesn't look like a con man at all."

"They say he's the best in the business. We'll see."

Outside, in the dim hallway, Ulysses Byrd stopped to study the shiny black lettering on the oak door. *Card Alarm, Inc.*, it read. *Frank Dayton, Pres.* He touched a finger to one of the letters and found that the paint was still wet.

Humming tunelessly, Byrd stepped into the elevator.

It was two days later, on a sunny Wednesday morning, that Byrd phoned the office of Card Alarm, Inc. and spoke to Linda Sanders. "Oh, yes, Mr. Byrd," she said cheerfully. "Mr. Dayton instructed me to help you in any way I could."

"Then how about having lunch with me?" Byrd asked.

"I . . ."

"Strictly business. I need some background information, and I thought it might be more pleasant over a sandwich."

"All right, I guess I could. There's a place around the corner where I go sometimes. Maxil's. Suppose I meet you there at one."

"I'll look forward to it," Byrd said.

Linda Sanders hung up and sat for a moment studying the telephone. Then she picked it up and dialed Frank Dayton's apartment. "Frank? Byrd just phoned and asked me to lunch."

At the other end of the line Dayton chuckled. "Your charms are lost on no man, my dear. Just remember to do exactly what I told you."

"But what if he becomes suspicious?"

"He'll have no reason to, not if you play your part well."

"All right," she said with a sigh. "I'll let you know how it goes."

She walked into Maxil's Restaurant at three minutes after one, and saw Ulysses Byrd lounging near the checkroom. "Hello," he said with a smile. "I wasn't sure I'd recognize you after our brief meeting the other day."

She decided the remark was not especially complimentary and wondered why he'd made it. "I recognized you right away. You look like my dentist."

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Byrd smiled and let the waiter lead them to a table. When they were seated he said, "But now that I've seen you again I won't ever forget. Have you worked for Card Alarm long?"

"I've been with Mr. Dayton nearly a year now," she answered honestly.

"It must be interesting work."

She shrugged casually. "It's a job."

"I only saw the two of you in the office. Are there other employees?"

"We have a plant down in San Mateo that manufactures the cards. It employs forty-five people." She sipped her glass of water and waited while Byrd ordered drinks. When the waiter had departed she asked, "Have you figured out a way to earn your ten thousand dollars yet?"

He leaned back in his chair. "Four ways, actually. I wonder if that would be worth forty thousand to Mr. Dayton."

She almost upset her glass. "*Four* ways?"

Byrd nodded. "A couple of them are quite clever, if I say so myself."

"You've built some sort of device to change the magnetic coding on the cards?"

Byrd shook his head. "In practice that wouldn't work. If Dayton wanted a device he should have hired an engineer instead of a confidence man No, my four systems are all forms of con games, and they all work."

"Mr. Dayton will be pleased to know you've been so successful," she said, trying to suppress her excitement.

"The real reason I invited you to lunch is so I can demonstrate one of the methods. It needs a man and woman to bring it off, so perhaps you can help me with it."

"You mean today?"

He nodded "Right after lunch."

"Well, I don't know if Mr Dayton would approve "

"Of course he'd approve! You can bring him a full report of how I'm earning my money "

The drinks came, and then a generous lunch, and somewhere in the middle of it Ulysses Byrd stopped looking like her dentist.

They crossed the street and walked down the block toward one of the city's larger department stores. The April afternoon was warming nicely, with a gentle breeze blowing in off the bay. "Byrd," she asked as they walked, "were you named Ulysses after Homer's hero or General Grant?"

"Neither one. My mother was an admirer of Joyce's novel."

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"Then what's the S. stand for?"

"When I know you better I'll tell you. Come on, I'm going to get you a new spring dress."

She followed him into the store. "How?"

"You'll see."

They rode the escalator to the third floor, and Linda spent some minutes looking through the rack of expensive spring dresses. Finally she chose a pretty pale green skirt with matching jacket. The price was $100. "How about this one?"

"Fine," Byrd said. "Come on." He found a saleslady and handed her the Credit Alarm credit card. "I had no time to get a store card," he explained in an undertone to Linda, "but they accept the Credit Alarm card too."

The clerk inserted the card into the typewriter-sized machine next to the cash register. Almost at once there was a loud ringing sound. The alarm bell had gone off in the Card Alarm machine.

"What's that?" Byrd asked innocently, when the clerk had removed the card. Several customers had turned to stare at him, and Linda was blushing with embarrassment.

"The alarm. This card is unauthorized for purchases. I'm sorry."

Byrd took the card and shook it at her. "Do you mean to tell me we've been branded as criminals by that *machine?* Please call the manager."

"You really don't—"

"Call the manager!" Byrd's face was flushed with anger, and for a moment Linda didn't know whether to be frightened or amused.

After a few minutes' wait a stout middle-aged man appeared, following the clerk. "I'm Mr. Burke. What seems to be the trouble here?"

"The trouble," Byrd said, choosing his words carefully, "is that your damned machine has announced my wife and me as criminals! That alarm bell was loud enough for everyone on this floor to hear!"

"You understand, sir, that credit cards have to be verified. The clerk was only doing her duty."

Byrd continued to flourish his card. "There's nothing wrong with my credit! Look here, my wife's practically in tears over this!"

The manager sighed. "Let me have the card, please."

Byrd surrendered it with more angry words, and Mr. Burke slipped it into the machine. There was a brief chattering of circuits and then a small green light came on.

"You see?" Byrd said, pointing an accusing finger.

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"It wasn't like that before, Mr. Burke," the flustered clerk said.

"Damn right it wasn't like that," Byrd shouted. "Alarm bells ringing—why, I expected to be arrested any minute!"

"There must have been some mistake," the manager said, staring dumfounded at the machine. "This has never happened before—but then it is a relatively new system."

"Is that all you have to say?" Byrd demanded.

The manager looked around, cornered. "Is this the dress? I'll write up the charge slip personally."

"Like hell you will!" Byrd exploded. "You don't treat people like criminals and get away with it! That alarm bell completely unnerved us. Look at my wife, she hasn't spoken a word since it happened!"

Linda felt their eyes on her and she blushed again. "It was terrible," she agreed. "Everyone looked at us. I was so embarrassed."

"Looked at us as if we were criminals! It's the last dealing we'll ever have with this store, and you will be hearing from my lawyer."

"Now, now," Burke tried to soothe. "I'm sure we can work something out. Lawyers only complicate matters. Our store aims to please every customer who walks through the front door."

"Hogwash!" Byrd spouted. "My lawyer—"

"Look, suppose your wife takes this dress with our compliments? Call it a good-will gesture?"

"I don't know—" Byrd hesitated. "What do you think, honey?"

"I think that would be fair," Linda replied on cue. "The fault was more the machine's than the store's. I don't want to get anyone in trouble."

Burke sighed with relief, not waiting for Byrd's decision. "Miss Clark, wrap the dress, please. And send the charge memo to my office. Then get a repairman in to check that machine. While he's at it, tell him the bell rings too damn loud!"

Ten minutes later Byrd and Linda were on the street. She looked down at the box in her hands, not quite able to believe it was all true. "You know, you're something of a wonder."

Byrd merely smiled. "Wait till you see my next three methods."

That evening, over drinks in Frank Dayton's apartment, Linda told what had happened. "The man's an absolute wizard, Frank! Before we left that store he had the manager eating out

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of his hand Look, this is the dress to prove it!"

Dayton nodded approvingly "I'm glad to see your taste is still good But if you knew you were getting it free, you should have found something for two hundred dollars instead of one "

"Believe me, Frank, I never dreamed he'd carry it off like that!"

"I never doubted him. Ulysses S. Byrd is one of the best con men in the country That's why I figured he could teach us a trick or two This one wouldn't be too practical, though. After it was pulled a few times, all the stores would be on Card Alarm's neck to tone down those bells or would eliminate them altogether."

"But you can't tell Byrd that. He thinks you're Card Alarm!"

"I know." Frank Dayton sipped his drink. "It's amazing what a rented office, some fancy furniture and business cards can do, isn't it?"

"Don't forget the ten thousand you promised Byrd."

"It'll be worth every penny. When's he coming to the office?"

"Tomorrow at eleven."

Frank Dayton nodded.

The morning was cooler, in the haphazard manner of April weather, and Byrd turned up the collar of his coat against the wind that blew along Market Street On the way to Frank Dayton's office he detoured back to the department store and stopped in to see Mr Burke again

"Well," Burke said, rising from his desk "Good to see you again, Sergeant. I hope everything went well yesterday "

"Perfect," Byrd assured him.

"The salesclerk was quite upset by the whole thing, until I assured her it was only a security test."

"I think it was very realistic "

"You gave me a hundred and fifty in advance for the dress, and it only came to a hundred plus tax. I have your change here. Or do you want to return the dress?"

"No. We'll keep it." Byrd accepted the money and thanked the man for his assistance. Then he left the store and continued down Market Street to Frank Dayton's office. It was nearly eleven o'clock and he didn't want to be late

This time Linda sat in on the meeting, stretching her long legs out in front of her as she studied Ulysses S. Byrd with new admiration. "Linda was quite impressed by yesterday's stunt," Frank Dayton told him. "Naturally, we've taken steps to correct the situation with the

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loud alarm bells. But tell me, just how did you manage to make the alarm ring the first time and not the second?"

"Simple," Byrd answered. "The first card was the one you gave me on Monday, with one of the embossed numbers filed down just enough to alert the computer. While the clerk went to summon the manager, I substituted a card of my own which was perfectly good."

"A neat trick, but hardly worth the ten thousand dollars by itself. Linda says you have three more."

"I do. But they're for sale Ten thousand each."

"No dice," Dayton replied with a touch of anger. "The agreement was ten thousand, period."

"They're so good that I might even try using them myself," Byrd said. "In the long run I'd make more than ten thousand from the stores and banks."

"You've got one that would work in a bank?"

Byrd nodded.

"Give me a demonstration. If it's that good the money is yours."

But Byrd merely smiled. "And if it's not that good you'll keep the money and guard against my system in the future."

"We're at a stalemate if we don't trust each other."

"Oh, very well," Byrd decided. "One more demonstration, and then you pay me."

"I'd like to go along this time," Dayton said.

"By all means. What's the nearest bank that uses the Card Alarm system?"

"The Pacific Trust has a branch just downstairs," Linda volunteered.

"That will be fine."

They rode down in the elevator with some giggling secretaries from the floor above, and Linda realized it was almost the lunch hour. The bank was crowded with customers at every teller's window. Byrd studied the lines for a moment and said, "This won't work as well with a busy teller. I need to build it up with a bit of casual conversation first. We'll have to try it later."

"You're not copping out?" Dayton asked.

"Certainly not. I told you I still had two more gimmicks up my sleeve. We'll try the hotel trick next."

He led them across the street and down the block, cutting across in front of a cable car to enter the lobby of one of the city's best hotels. Byrd registered for a room at the front desk, explaining that he'd be staying two nights and that his baggage would be along presently. The smiling clerk gave

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him the key to Room 507

Next Byrd stepped back to the cashier's window and told the woman, "I'm registered in Room 507 Could you cash a check for me?"

"How large?"

"Two hundred dollars."

"That would have to be approved by the manager, unless you have a credit card."

"I have a credit card using the Card Alarm system Will that do?"

"Certainly, sir If the check is returned for insufficient funds, the credit card pays us and bills your account It's a very good system."

She inserted Byrd's card in the machine and waited till the green light glowed. "Thank you," he said as she returned the card and gave him ten twenty-dollar bills.

"Enjoy your stay with us."

"I'm sure I will."

Outside, Frank Dayton said, "So you passed a bum check What's so clever about that?"

"But I could go on passing bum checks all day long on the basis of this card. You see, when you actually make a purchase the central computer records it but doesn't let your credit run up too high. Card Alarm, like other credit-card systems, has a maximum line of credit. Bank cards are generally pegged at between $500 and $1000 Others are higher But my point is that the cashier just now wasn't subtracting anything from my credit balance She was only verifying the status of my credit If I went out to a half-dozen stores and charged $200 in each one, pretty soon I'd be stopped by the computer from making further purchases But I could cash an unlimited number of bum $200 checks, because the computer wouldn't get the information till the checks started to bounce"

"How could we counteract that?" Dayton asked

"Simple enough Just an instruction to all your clients not to cash checks without ringing up the amount on the computer, just as if it were a merchandise sale"

Dayton nodded "What about the hotel room you took?"

Byrd flipped him the key "I won't be needing it. But she wouldn't have cashed my check if I wasn't a guest at the hotel"

"And you say you've still got two more methods to show us?"

Byrd nodded. "The bank and the envelope."

"What's the envelope method?"

Byrd held up his hand "In due time. Right now I think you should produce a little money."

"Very well," Frank Dayton

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said. "I'll give you a check for ten thousand. You seem to have earned it."

"I thought we'd agreed on twenty."

"Be reasonable, Byrd! I can't spend too much of the company's funds on this."

"All right. Pay me my ten and put ten with it and I'll show you an improved method of my bank gimmick."

"I haven't seen the regular method yet," Dayton reminded him. "What do you need twenty grand for?"

"To open an account at Pacific Trust."

"You can open an account with five bucks."

Byrd sighed. "The federal government, through the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, insures bank accounts only up to twenty thousand dollars. For that reason, some people are reluctant to leave more than twenty thousand in an account. They usually open a second account of a different type, or at another bank, once the $20,000 figure is reached. We have to have twenty grand in the account so that it won't seem odd when we open a second one."

"And what do we do with the second one?"

Ulysses S. Byrd smiled. "We swindle the bank out of a great deal of money."

"You mean pretend to swindle," Frank Dayton corrected

"Pretend. Of course," Byrd said with a slightly wider smile. "Do you have the money?"

"Of course I have it, but it belongs to the company," Dayton hedged. "I can't take a chance on losing it."

"There's no chance of losing it. We put the money in the bank for a few hours and then draw it out again."

Linda, who had remained silent since they had left the hotel, spoke now. "Let's forget about this whole thing, Frank I don't like it."

Dayton was annoyed by her remark. "What are you talking about? What's the matter?"

She glanced sideways at Ulysses Byrd, as if to assure herself that she was right, then tugged on Dayton's sleeve "Let's talk about this. Will you excuse us for a moment, Mr Byrd?"

"Certainly."

She pulled Dayton into the doorway of a store. "Frank, he *knows!*"

"What are you—crazy? You're ruining the whole thing!"

"He *knows*, Frank! Can't you tell? He wouldn't be talking about swindling the bank if he didn't know we were trying to pull a con on him."

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"Be reasonable, Linda. How could he possibly know?"

"If he was suspicious of the least little thing in our office, he could have phoned Card Alarm's headquarters and asked if you were employed by them. When they said no, he wouldn't have to be a genius to figure out the rest of it—that we wanted his schemes to use ourselves."

Frank Dayton thought about that. He looked over at Byrd, standing by the curb as if he was waiting for a bus, and said finally, "You may be right."

"Of course I'm right, Frank! What he's really proposing is that the two of you team up on this thing."

They went back to where Byrd was standing and Dayton said, "I think we should go up to my office and talk some more."

"Anything you say," Byrd replied.

By the time Linda arrived with coffee and sandwiches, she could see that the truth was out in the open. "We understand each other completely," Frank Dayton informed her. "Byrd thinks there's a way we can all make a lot of money from that bank downstairs."

Ulysses Byrd smiled in her direction. "You people were very clever. But you should have let the paint dry on your office door before you invited me up."

"I'm glad it's out in the open now," Linda said.

"So am I." Byrd told her.

Frank Dayton finished writing a check and passed it across the desk. "Here's your ten thousand, just so we start out on an even footing. Now what do you propose?"

"We each deposit ten thousand in a joint account downstairs. That will rate us pretty good with the bank. Then, just before the three o'clock closing, we come in to open a second account. We go to the same officer. He knows us, knows we have twenty thousand in the bank already, and he won't ask too many questions. What we will deposit in the new account is a few thousand in cash, a number of bum checks, and a few good ones. This second account will be a checking account."

"What's that got to do with credit cards?"

"There are three ways of using credit cards in general practice," Byrd explained, a bit like a banker on a TV commercial. "First is to buy merchandise, which Linda and I did yesterday. Second is to cash checks, which we did today. Third is to obtain bank loans, and that's what we're going to

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do next. You see, if a cardholder overdraws on his checking account, the loan operation automatically goes into effect. Money is placed in the account and the bank's computer starts figuring up the interest on it."

"I know all that."

"What we'll do tomorrow is to withdraw everything, hitting the branch banks with checks for a few thousand dollars each. It all goes through the computer, and we'll have ten thousand of the bank's money before anyone's the wiser."

Frank Dayton scratched his nose, thinking about it. "What do we need the first account for?"

"Back-up. If some bank official happens to question all the checking account withdrawals, there's still the twenty thousand in the savings account to make it look good. We can tell him we'll transfer the money over to checking. Once we've safely withdrawn our few thousand from checking, plus the bank's ten thousand dollar loan—that's the limit of the line of credit on these cards—we pull the twenty thousand out of the savings account."

"How much do we clear?"

"Ten thousand for sure. We may get a few thousand more from the bum checks we deposited, if they don't put a hold on them. But that'll be gravy."

"And we each put up ten grand?"

Byrd nodded. "Maybe a few thousand more, if you have it. Just to make that checking account look legitimate. After all, it's only for overnight."

They deposited the $20,000 at two o'clock, then returned just before three to open the checking account. Dayton supplied $3700 in cash, together with two bum checks totaling $5000 more. It was deposited to the joint checking account, using the number of Byrd's credit card.

"That's done," Dayton said, standing outside the bank as its doors were being locked for the day. "Who keeps the bank books overnight?"

Byrd shrugged casually. "Let's split them. You take one and I'll take the other." He passed one to Dayton.

"What about your fourth method—the envelope one?"

"We'll do that tomorrow."

"What time do we meet in the morning?"

"Sometimes they call me The Early Byrd. We'll hit those branches the minute they open—on the nose."

Linda arrived at the office early the next morning to find Frank Dayton already at his desk. "Have you been here all night?" she asked.

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"Hardly. I just wanted to get in early and clean things up. After today we'll have no need for this office. Damn. I wish Byrd would get here!"

"He said he'd be here on time."

"I guess I'm just nervous."

"That's not like you, Frank."

"I just wish he'd get here."

The door opened and a uniformed messenger entered. "Frank Dayton?"

"That's me. What've you got?"

"Envelope for you, sir."

Dayton snatched it and tore it open. Inside was the bank book and a note: *Called out of town unexpectedly. Carry on. U.S.B.*

"Out of town! What the hell does that mean?"

"At least he sent the bank book," Linda said as the messenger, disappointed at the lack of a tip, retreated through the doorway.

"Yeah." Dayton flipped through it and a feather drifted out. "What the hell?"

"That's a bird's feather. I wonder . . ."

Frank Dayton let out a curse. "This is the book for the savings account! It shows a deposit of $20,000 and a withdrawal of $19,995! There's a balance of just five dollars!"

"What? When?"

"The withdrawal has today's date! But that's impossible! The bank's not even open yet!" He ran a hand through his hair, unable to understand.

"The Early Byrd," Linda said.

"What?"

"They call him The Early Byrd. Those banks all have walk-up windows that are open an extra hour or two in the afternoon. And the transaction is listed as of the following day."

"You mean he conned us?"

Linda nodded silently.

"Out of ten thousand?"

"Twenty thousand, Frank. I don't think any of his schemes will work."

Frank Dayton sat at his desk in silence, staring down at the bank book and the feather. After a moment he asked, "What about the envelope trick he promised, Linda? What about that?"

She picked up the envelope the messenger had delivered. "I'm afraid we've had that one too, Frank," she answered.

"Q"

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THE GUN PUZZLE

by REX STOUT

(continued from page 36)

When you mount the seven steps to the stoop and enter the hall of the old brownstone on West 35th Street, the first door on your left is to what we call the front room, with the office door farther along on that side. The walls and doors of the front room and office are soundproofed. After convoying the company to the front room and telling them they wouldn't have to wait long, I returned to the hall, put my hat and coat on the rack, proceeded to the office, and put the box on Wolfe's desk pad.

"Good timing," I said. "In another hour or two they would probably have found it."

He reached to pass his fingertips along its edge. "You haven't opened it."

"No. It's a good lock. They're in the front room, all four. I gave them their pick, you or the cops, and they preferred you. There's nothing to add to what I told you on the phone. Before I open it I want to register a guess. Not that it's what Hazen had on them, that's a cinch. My guess is specifically what he had on Mrs. Oliver. She murdered her husband. Wait till you see her."

He made a face. "This will be distasteful. Bring keys."

I went to the cabinet at the far wall, opened a drawer, and made selections. Although I couldn't qualify on the witness stand as a lock expert, I know a Hotchkiss from a Euler, and I can open your suitcase with a paper clip if you'll be patient. Moving the box to my desk, I sat and started in. I had selected four types, little boxes of assortments. In three minutes I eliminated the first type, and in another three the second one. The third seemed more promising, and I was getting hot when Wolfe growled, "Get a hammer and screwdriver."

As he spoke it clicked and I had it. I raised the lid. The box was empty. I upended it for Wolfe to see. "Yeah," I said. "It sure is distasteful."

He took in air, about a bushel, and let it out again. "It's just as well. It would probably have presented us with a problem. More than one. I presume he decided it was a mistake to tell his wife of it and

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removed the contents. Elsewhere in the house?"

"I doubt it."

"So do I." He leaned back, closed his eyes, and pushed his lips out. In a moment he pulled them in, and then out and in, out and in. He was working. A minute passed, two minutes, three. . .He opened his eyes and straightened up. "Lock the box and leave it on your desk. Put the keys away. Have a gun in your hand when you admit them, and go to your desk and stay there. Proceed."

I proceeded. After locking the box and returning the keys to the cabinet, I moved four of the yellow chairs up, in a row facing Wolfe's desk, got the gun out, opened the door to the front room, and invited them to enter. The gentlemen followed the ladies. I went to my desk and pronounced names, and when they were seated I sat, with the gun in my hand resting on my thigh.

Wolfe's eyes went right and then left. "This shouldn't take long," he said. "First the situation. I shall not resort to euphemism. You were being blackmailed by Mr. Hazen, either collectively—please don't interrupt. Either collectively or separately. He had other victims, but you four alone were paying him around a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year, ostensibly for professional services, but that was merely a subterfuge. I don't know whether the police know that or not, probably not, but I do. If there was any doubt, it was removed when Mr. Goodwin found you in that house surreptitiously, looking for something, and you offered him a large sum of money. So much—"

"I didn't," Mrs. Oliver blurted. "Mr. Perdis did."

"Pfui. You were there. Did you object? So much for that. I am acting for my client, Mrs. Hazen. She is being held under suspicion of killing her husband, and has given me certain information. This is one item: one day about a year ago her husband showed her a box, a metal box, he had in his bedroom. To show it to her he removed the bottom drawer of a chest and pried up the board the drawer slid on, and the box was underneath the board.

"He told her that if he died she should get the box, have it opened by a locksmith, and burn the contents without looking at them. It was to get that box that Mr. Goodwin went there this evening, with Mrs. Hazen's key and authority. After you left the room he removed the drawer and lifted the board, and got it. It's there on his desk."

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That was like him. I hadn't told him that I had sent them from the room before I got it, and that they hadn't seen it; he took it for granted. I appreciate his compliments, but some day he may overestimate me. I had no idea where or what he was headed for, but I thought a little gesture wouldn't hurt, so I got the box with my left hand, the gun being in my right, and displayed it.

Four pairs of eyes were on it, glued to it. Anne Talbot mumbled something. Perdis started up, thought better of it, and sank back. Jules Khoury muttered, "So it was there." I had the gun, but there were four of them, so I got up, detoured around them to the safe, opened the safe door, put the box in, closed the door, and spun the knob. As I returned to my chair Wolfe was speaking.

"I have a proposal to make, but first a question or two. My objective, of course, is to demonstrate that Mrs. Hazen did not kill her husband. Yesterday evening you dined at her table. After dinner she went to her room, and soon after that Mr. Weed left. I'm not going to ask about the sequence and the times of your departures, or where you went and what you did, the police have got all that from you, and if the matter can be resolved by such details they are extremely competent at that sort of thing, and they are ahead of me, with an army. But I want to know about your conversation with Mr. Hazen after his wife and Mr. Weed left. What was said?"

"Nothing," Khoury declared.

"Nonsense. Mr. Hazen had told his wife he was going to discuss something with you What?"

"Nothing of any importance. He opened champagne. We discussed the stock market. He asked Mrs. Talbot what plays she had seen. He got Perdis talking about ships."

"He talked about poisons," Perdis said.

"He talked about his wife's father," Mrs. Oliver said. "He said his wife's father was a great inventor, a genius."

Wolfe scowled at them. "This is egregious. If he discussed some aspect of his peculiar relations with you, naturally you didn't tell the police about it. But I know of those relations and the police don't. I intend to know what was said."

"You don't understand, Mr. Wolfe." It was Anne Talbot. She was leaning forward, appealing to him. "You didn't know him. He was a monster. He was a demon. He didn't want to discuss anything, he

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just wanted to have us there together, and we had to go. It was his special kind of torture. He wanted each of us to know about the others and to know that the others knew about us. He liked to see us trying to act as if it were just a—just a dinner party. You didn't know him."

"He was a devil," Perdis said.

Wolfe surveyed them. "Did he reveal to any of you the nature of his hold on the others, last evening or any other time? Or hint at it?"

Anne Talbot and Khoury shook their heads. Mrs. Oliver said, "No, oh, no." Perdis said, "I think he hinted. For instance, poison. I thought he hinted."

"But no particulars?"

"No."

"I must concede that he was not an estimable man. Very well, he is dead, and here we are. As I said, I have a proposal. It is highly likely, all but certain, that he kept in that box whatever support he had for his demands on you. The box is in my safe. I don't desire or intend to inspect its contents. But Mrs. Hazen is my client and I am committed to protect both her person and her property. She is not bound to follow her husband's instructions to burn the contents of the box, and it would be quixotic to destroy anything so valuable. I will surrender it to you, you four, for one million dollars."

They gawked at him.

"That's a large sum, but it is not exorbitant. In another seven years, if Mr. Hazen had lived, you would have paid him more than that, and that wouldn't have ended it. This will; this will be final. If I left it to you to apportion the burden you would probably haggle, and time is short, so I shall expect one quarter of the million from each of you, either in currency or certified checks, within twenty-four hours. There is no question of extortion by Mrs. Hazen or me; we haven't seen the contents of the box; I only say, as her agent, you may have them at that price if you want them."

"You haven't opened the box," Perdis said.

"No, I haven't."

"What if it's empty?"

"You get nothing and you pay nothing." Wolfe looked up at the clock. "The box will be opened here tomorrow at midnight, with all of you present, or earlier if and when you meet the terms. If it is empty, so much for that. If it isn't, there will of course be a difficulty. None of you will want the others to inspect the items that pertain to him. I don't want to look at any of them. I suggest that Mr.

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Goodwin, who is thoroughly discreet, may remove the items singly, examine each one only enough to determine whom it applies to, and hand it over. If you have a better procedure to suggest, do so."

Mrs. Oliver was licking her lips and swallowing, by turns. Perdis was hunched over, his lips tight, his heavy broad shoulders rising and falling with his breathing. Khoury had his chin up, his narrowed eyes aimed at Wolfe past the tip of his long thin nose. Anne Talbot's eyes were closed, and a muscle at the side of her pretty neck was twitching.

"I realize," Wolfe said, "that it may not be easy to produce so large a sum in so short a time, but it is not impossible, and I dare not give you longer. While it is true that the box and its contents are the property of Mrs. Hazen, the police would no doubt regard it as evidential in their investigation of a murder, and I can't undertake to withhold my knowledge of it longer than twenty-four hours." He pushed his chair back and rose. "I shall await your pleasure."

But if he was through they weren't. Mrs. Oliver wanted the box opened then and there, and a display of its contents by me. Khoury said that there *was* a question of extortion, that they were being told to fork over a million dollars in twenty-four hours or else. Perdis demanded that they be given the time and opportunity to talk with Mrs. Hazen, but of course she was in the coop. Anne Talbot was the only one who had nothing to say; she was on her feet, gripping the back of the chair, the muscle in her neck still twitching. Thinking it might help if I brought their coats, I did so, and it took Anne Talbot three tries to find the armhole.

When they were out, and the door shut, and I returned to the office, Wolfe was out from behind his desk. "A notion," I said. "Mrs. Hazen may be out on bail by the middle of the morning and accessible to them, and you're up in the plant rooms until eleven o'clock, not to be disturbed. Even if she's locked up, those people have lawyers and connections, Perdis especially. He may play poker with the D.A. I could phone Parker to see her in the morning and tell her that no matter what she hears you're not loony, you're just a genius, and you know where you're headed for even when nobody else does, including me."

"Not necessary." He went to the door and turned. "Make sure that the safe's locked. I'm tired. Good night."

He knows darned well that I

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always make sure the safe's locked, but of course it doesn't often have something in it that's supposed to be worth a million bucks. Up in my room on the third floor, as I undressed, I made assorted tries at deciding what was next on his program, and didn't like any of them.

As it turned out the next thing on the program wasn't decided either by me or by him, but by Inspector Cramer. In the morning Wolfe came down from the plant rooms at eleven o'clock as usual, and also as usual I had the mail opened and the dusting done and fresh water in the vase on his desk. He went first to the front of the desk to put a spray of orchids in the vase, Odontoglossum pyramus, then circled around to his chair. As he sat the doorbell rang.

I went to the office door for a look and told him it was Cramer. He slapped a palm on the desk, glared at me, and said nothing, and I went to the front and opened up. I didn't like the look on Cramer's face as he entered and let me take his coat and hat. He almost grinned at me, and he didn't stride to the office, he just walked. He sat in the red leather chair, crossed his legs comfortably, and told Wolfe, "I haven't got much time. I want to hear it from you what Mrs. Hazen came to you for yesterday, just the substance, and then Goodwin will come downtown and get it down in a statement, all of it. With his wonderful memory."

Wolfe was glowering at him. "Mr. Cramer. It shouldn't be—"

"Save it. She's booked for murder. We have the gun. Hazen got his car from the garage Monday night. It has been found parked on Twenty-first Street. There was a gun in the dashboard compartment, and it fired the bullet that killed him. We have traced it. It was bought by Hazen six years ago and he had a permit for it. He kept it in a drawer in his bedroom, and the maid saw it there yesterday morning when she went up to see why he hadn't come down for breakfast. Don't ask me why Mrs. Hazen took it from there afterwards and went to where she had parked the car on Twenty-first Street and put it in the car. I don't know, but maybe you do. So let's hear you."

I squeezed my eyes shut because if I had kept them open they would have popped, and I didn't want to give Cramer that satisfaction. But I am supposed to help Wolfe when he needs it, and right then he sure could use a few seconds to arrange his

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mind, so I opened my eyes and asked Cramer, just curious, "What kind of gun?"

He ignored it. He was having too good a time looking at Wolfe to bother with me. Wolfe was paying me another compliment. I was responsible for our assumption that Mrs. Hazen was innocent, but he didn't glance at me. He lowered his chin, scratched the tip of his nose, regarded Cramer for ten seconds, then turned to me.

"Archie. It may be desirable to have a record of what Mr. Cramer just said. Type it. Verbatim. Double-spaced, one carbon."

As I got at the typewriter Cramer said, "I don't object. Naturally you've got to stall while you try to figure a way to climb down without breaking your neck."

No comment from Wolfe. I put in paper and hit the keys. Since I had had years of practise reporting long and involved conversations that had had time to fade, that one was no trick at all. As I rolled the paper out Wolfe said, "Initial the original," and I did so, and handed it to him. He read it through, in no hurry, took his pen and initialed it, handed it back to me, and turned to Cramer.

"I'm not stalling," he said. "If what you just told me is true, your demand for information is warranted. If it isn't true you're gulling me into disclosing a confidential communication from a client, and I want a record—"

"Then she's your client?"

"She is now. She wasn't when you were here yesterday, but she hired me later through Mr. Parker. I want a record of your words, and I have it. I also want more facts, to make sure that those you have given me are not qualified by others. That's a reasonable precaution, I think. What time did Mr. Hazen take his car from the garage Monday evening?"

"A little after eleven o'clock."

"That was after the dinner guests left?"

"Yes. They left at a quarter to eleven."

"Was anyone with him at the garage?"

"No."

"Was anyone seen with him anywhere, out of the car or in it, after a quarter to eleven?"

"No."

"Is it assumed that he was shot in that alley where the body was found?"

"No. He was shot in the car."

"Have you any additional facts implicating Mrs. Hazen, of any kind? Not conjectures, facts. For example, was she

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seen in or near the car, driving it, or when it was parked on Twenty-first Street during the night, or when—as you have it—she went there yesterday to put the gun in the dashboard compartment?"

"No. No more facts. I expect to get some from you."

"You will. Naturally, when you learned that Mrs. Hazen had been to see me you focused on her, but surely not exclusively. Have you inquired into the movements of the dinner guests after they left?"

"Yes."

"Have any of them been conclusively eliminated?"

"No. Not conclusively."

Wolfe closed his eyes. In a moment he opened them. "That seems to cover it." He took a breath. "Of course I don't like this. And you're not squeezing it out of me, though you think you are. I would tell you nothing and take the consequences if it weren't that I need some information that I can get only from you. I have to know where the gun came from that Mrs. Hazen left with me yesterday. If you'll agree—"

"She left a gun with *you*?"

"Yes. I'll tell you about it, and give it to you, if you will give me its history at the earliest possible moment. I want your word."

"You won't get it. Mrs. Hazen is charged with murder. If she left a gun with you it's evidence in a murder investigation."

Wolfe shook his head. "No. It's evidence in *my* investigation, but not in yours. You have your gun, the one the murderer used. How can it embarrass you to tell me about this one?"

Cramer considered it. "You're going to tell me what she said about it."

"I am."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"I have your word?"

"Yes."

"Get the gun, Archie."

I went to the safe and squatted to twirl the knob. Ordinarily I leave it unlocked when I'm in the office, but with that box in it I was taking no chances, so after I had worked the combination and got the gun I shut the door and turned the knob. As I crossed to Cramer I spoke. "By the way, I asked a question that wasn't answered. What make is your gun? The one that killed him."

"Drexel thirty-two."

"So's this." I handed it to him. "Of course there are millions of Drexel thirty-twos."

He gave it a look, and darned if he didn't sniff it. As I said, that's automatic. Also he flipped the cylinder open for a glance.

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"It was fired yesterday," Wolfe said, "by Mr. Goodwin, to get a bullet. The bullet I gave you."

Cramer nodded. "Yeah. There's nothing on God's earth you wouldn't do. It could have been. . .What the hell, it wasn't. Okay, let's hear you."

Wolfe unloaded. He didn't enjoy it and neither did I, spilling it, but we had to know about the gun and it might have taken us days. He skipped the details, including no quotes, but gave it straight, both parts, before the news came over the radio and after. He didn't include my reasons for deciding that she hadn't shot her husband, but I didn't mind; it might have got Cramer confused and that would have been a pity. He was a little confused anyhow; toward the end he was frowning, pulling at his lip now and then, a wary look in his eyes. When Wolfe finished he sat looking at it before he spoke.

"What have you left out?" he demanded.

Wolfe shook his head. "Nothing material. You said you wanted the substance; you have it. How long will it take to trace the gun?"

"I don't get it. After she came to you with that fairy tale, and the news came about her husband, and you learned that we were holding her, you took her for a client? I don't get it. I have never known you to take a murderer for a client. Whether it's just your damn luck, or what, I don't know, but you haven't. Why did you take her?"

A corner of Wolfe's mouth turned up. "I asked Mr. Goodwin's opinion and he said she was innocent. His judgment of women under thirty is infallible. How long will it take to trace the gun?"

"Nuts." Cramer stood up. "Maybe an hour, maybe a week. I'm taking Goodwin. They'll take his statement at the District Attorney's office, a complete report of the conversation. I'll have a man here at two o'clock to take yours. If I took you down you'd only—"

"I shall sign no statement. I am not obliged to. If you send a man he won't be admitted. If you have questions, ask them."

Cramer's round red face got redder. But that was as far as it went; his memory of what had happened on the three occasions he had taken Wolfe downtown was presumably what stopped him. He stuck the gun in his pocket and turned to me. "Come on, Goodwin. We'll see."

As I arose the phone rang and I reached to get it. It was Nathaniel Parker. He was upset.

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"Archie? Nat Parker. Mrs. Hazen is being held on a charge of homicide, without bail. I want to see Wolfe before I see her. I have to know what she told him yesterday. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Fine," I said. "He's in a perfect mood for it. Come ahead." I hung up, told Wolfe, "Parker will be here in twenty minutes," and went to the hall for my coat and hat, with Cramer at my heels.

During the next nine hours I had various opportunities to try to sort it out. En route in a police car to the D.A.'s office, later from there to Homicide West on 20th Street, and several waiting periods while assorted officers of the law, including the D.A. himself at one point, decided what to do next.

It was complicated enough even before an Assistant D.A. kindly permitted me to use a phone, around three o'clock, and I called Wolfe. Of course the game was button, button, who had the gun when and where? Either gun. If Lucy Hazen had lied, how much? Had the gun that the maid had seen in the drawer Tuesday morning been the one that had shot Hazen or the one she had brought to Wolfe?

If the former, Lucy was a liar and also either was a murderer or could name him. If the latter, who had put it in the drawer and when? And why? It wasn't that there were no possible answers; there were too many. And too many of them made it too likely that Lucy had made a monkey of me and therefore were not acceptable.

The first hour or so I was entertained by an Assistant D.A. named Mandel, who was not a stranger to me, and a Homicide Bureau lieutenant, and it was obvious that the gun puzzle was as tough for them as it was for me, though they didn't say so. Then, while we were having sandwiches and coffee, no recess called, at Mandel's desk, a phone call came for him, and he took the lieutenant to another room, and when they returned their attitude was quite different.

Apparently they were no longer interested in guns; they concentrated on what Lucy had said to Wolfe and me, her exact words; and finally, a little before three o'clock, Mandel called a stenographer in and told me to start dictating my statement. Of course the room was wired for sound, and they would have fun later comparing my dictated statement with what I had told them. It was then that I insisted on making a phone call and was escorted to a booth.

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I got Wolfe. "Me. In a booth at the D.A.'s office, and it may be tapped. They should be finished with me by the end of the week. They were curious about guns, and then a phone call came and they weren't. I thought you might like to know."

"I already know." He didn't sound depressed. "Mr. Cramer phoned shortly after one. The gun we gave him had been traced without difficulty. It was purchased by Mrs. Hazen's father, Titus Postel, in 1953, and he committed suicide with it five years ago, in 1955."

"And she had it?"

"Not established. I have told Mr. Parker to ask her when he sees her this afternoon. Meanwhile I have got Saul and given him an errand."

I would have liked to ask him what errand, but that wasn't advisable since we might have company on the line. Saul Panzer, the first and best man on our list when we need help, charges more than any other free-lance operative in New York, and is worth five times as much. I told Wolfe I might or might not be home for dinner.

Dictating my statement to the stenographer, I had to keep jerking my mind back to it. The gun puzzle was okay now for the cops, since they had tagged Lucy; now they didn't have to buy it that she had been nutty enough to take the gun home after she shot him and put it in the drawer, and the next day get it and take it back to the car. It was much neater. She had got the gun from the drawer Monday, put the one she had, that had been her father's, in its place, and left it in the car after she shot him. And Tuesday she had got the gun from the drawer and brought it to Wolfe as a prop for her fairy tale, evidently not knowing that guns have numbers that can be traced. What better could you ask for?

But for me, unless I was ready to give Lucy up as a bad job, it was what worse could I ask for. Before, there had been too many answers; now there weren't any. I had to file it while I dictated my statement, in which I was supposed to include everything Lucy had said to us in Wolfe's office, and while I went over it after it was typed, and it wasn't easy.

Then I was taken to the office of the D.A. himself, and he and Mandel pecked at me for an hour; and when they finished, around 6:30, and I supposed that was all for the day, I was informed that Cramer wanted me at Homicide West. If I had balked they would have booked me as a material witness and Parker

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couldn't come to the rescue until morning, so I took it.

In one respect it was an improvement. The dick at Homicide West whom Cramer sent for sandwiches happened to be civilized enough to think that even a dog has a right to eat what he likes, and I got what I asked for, corned beef on rye and milk. Except for that, it was just more of the same for more than two hours with Cramer and Sergeant Purley Stebbins. I didn't even have the satisfaction of getting a chance to break my record with Lieutenant Rowcliff. I once got him stuttering in two minutes and twenty seconds, and I have a bet with Saul Panzer that I can do it in two minutes flat with three more tries.

Cramer and Stebbins finally decided they had had enough of me. It was 9:32 by my watch, and 9:34 by the clock on the wall, which was wrong, as I crossed the reception room of the precinct house to the door, and on out. I stood on the sidewalk for three good breaths of the cold fresh air, giving my lungs a treat and deciding which way to turn. If right, toward Eighth Avenue, it would be for a taxi; if left, toward Ninth, it would be for a fifteen-minute walk. Voting for the walk, I moved, and had taken three steps when my shoulder was grabbed and yanked from behind and a voice came, with feeling: "You dirty rat!"

The yank had turned me some and I turned myself the rest of the way. It was Theodore Weed. His hands were fists, and the right one was back a foot, with the elbow bent. His eyes were blazing and his bony jaw was set.

"Not here, you damn fool," I said. "Even if you drop me with one swing, which is doubtful, I'll yell police as I go down and here they'll come. Besides, I have a right to know why I'm a rat while I'm still conscious. Why?"

"You know why. You're a filthy stool, and Nero Wolfe too. You're working for Lucy? You are like hell. You gave the police that gun."

"How do you know we did?"

"Things they asked me. Do you deny it?"

My brain was a little tired after the long day, but it was doing its best. This character was by no means crossed off. We only had his word for it that he would give both arms to help Lucy; he had said himself that she didn't know how he felt about her. A chat with him wouldn't hurt and might help, but I couldn't take him home with me until I knew what

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Wolfe had on his program, if anything.

He still had fists. "I'll tell you what," I said. "We'll go around the corner to Jake's and I'll buy you a drink and we'll discuss it. Then if you still want to take a poke at me Jake will let us use the back room provided we let him watch. Afterwards you can comb your hair if you're up to it. It needs it."

It didn't appeal to him, but what would have? A couple of passersby, noticing his stance and his fists, had stopped to see, and a harness bull, emerging from the station, had also stopped. So he came.

At Jake's, when we had sat at a table by the wall and given our orders to the white apron, and I said I had to make a phone call, he got up and came along to the booth. Very bad manners, but I didn't correct him. I even let him stand in the door of the booth so I couldn't close it. I dialed a number and got it.

"Me. In a booth on Eighth Avenue. Theodore Weed is here at my elbow. He stopped me on the sidewalk to tell me that you and I are filthy stools because we gave the gun to the cops. When I asked him how he knew we did he said from things they asked him, which is possible since he had just come from Homicide West, probably from a session with Rowcliff, and you know Rowcliff. I'm buying him a drink, but I thought you might like to apologize to him personally for tossing our client to the wolves. He has blood in his eye."

"No. Come home at once."

"You have Saul."

"Not here. I need you. Mrs. Oliver and Mr. Perdis are in the front room. Mrs. Oliver has been here since seven o'clock. Mr. Khoury will arrive at any moment. I have been pestered by this confounded telephone all day. Mrs. Talbot called for the fifth time half an hour ago to say that she hopes to be here by ten o'clock, and it's nearly that now. On second thought, bring Mr. Weed. I have a question for him."

"You'll have to bulldog him first."

"Pfui. Bring him. How soon will you be here?"

I told him fifteen minutes, and hung up. "No time for a drink," I told Weed. "Nor for a floor show, with me on the floor. Mr. Wolfe wants me. You may come along if you care to."

"I was going there," he said grimly, "when I saw you."

"Good. But take it easy. He has a knife in his belt that he uses to stab people in the back."

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On the way out I handed the white apron, whose name was Gil, a couple of ones. Outside, we flagged a taxi, and as it rolled uptown I undertook to straighten him out. "Look at it," I said. "If we're stools and selling her to the cops there's not much of anything you can do but shoot us, and even that wouldn't help her any. The fact is, we're with her and you're not. We know she didn't kill her husband. Either you thought she had and probably still do, or you killed him yourself. If the former, your feeling for her has got a smudge. If the latter, you did a swell job, handling it so that she gets the credit for it. Go soak your head."

"Why did you give the police the gun?"

"Soak your head some more. We're working for her, not you."

No comment until the cab was turning into 35th Street, then: "I don't think she killed him."

"Good for you. We appreciate it."

"And I didn't."

"That's not so important, but we'll keep it in mind."

At the curb in front of the old brownstone there was a black limousine with a chauffeur in it. That would be Mrs. Oliver's. Mounting the seven steps to the stoop, I used my key, but the chain bolt was on and I had to ring for Fritz. As he took Weed's coat and I disposed of mine, he said, "Thank God, Archie, thank God," and I asked him what for, and he said, "For you. It has been very bad. Three phone calls during dinner, and that woman was in the front room."

"I can imagine. How many are in there now?"

"Three. Her and two men."

So Khoury had come. I took Weed to the office. Wolfe was at his desk with a book. Weed headed for him, talking. "I want to know why—"

"Shut up!" Wolfe bellowed.

Wolfe's bellow would stop a tiger ready to spring. Weed stood and glared at him. Wolfe finished a paragraph, inserted his marker, put the book down, and issued a command. "Sit down. I prefer eyes at my level. Sit down! When you arrived at the Hazens' for dinner Monday evening were the others already there?"

"I want to know why you gave the gun—"

"Bah. Are you a jackass? You must be, to suppose you can call me to account. Sit down! You said you would give an arm to help Mrs. Hazen. Keep your arm; I want only some information. Must I repeat my question?"

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Five of the yellow chairs were there. Weed took the nearest one. He ran his fingers through his mop of hair, but only a comb and brush could have handled it. "Mrs. Oliver was there," he said. "And Khoury, Perdis and Mrs. Talbot came soon after I did. I don't see why—"

"This is what I want to know. While you were there, was any one of them absent from the gathering long enough to go to Mr. Hazen's bedroom and back? Consider it. Dismiss your fatuous huff for the moment and put your mind on something pertinent."

Weed tried to. To do so he had to take his eyes from Wolfe, so he tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling. He took his time, then lowered his head. "I don't think so. I'm pretty sure none of them left the room at all, either before we went to the dining room or after. Of course they were all there when I left, so—"

The doorbell rang. I went to the hall, but Fritz was there opening the door. When the newcomer had crossed the sill I stepped back into the office and Wolfe asked, "Mrs. Talbot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Weed to the hall, then bring them in, and Mr. Weed to the front room. We may need him later."

"I'm staying right here," Weed declared, "until I—"

"You are not. I have work to do and no time to bicker with you. Out. Out!"

"But damn it—"

"Out."

Weed looked at me, standing at the door. What he met was a stony gaze. He got up and walked past me and into the hall. When he was four paces along I went and opened the door to the front room.

I put Anne Talbot in the chair nearest me because from her face and the way she moved it seemed likely that she might need smelling salts any minute, and there were some in my drawer. Next to her was Jules Khoury, then Mrs. Oliver, and then Ambrose Perdis. I had expected remarks as they entered, especially from Mrs. Oliver, who had been waiting more than three hours, but there hadn't been a peep from anyone. I felt like an usher at a funeral.

Wolfe took them in. "Since you are here," he said, "I assume that you are prepared to act on my proposal. Mrs. Oliver?"

I had her in profile and couldn't see her deep-set yellow eyes, and from that angle her sagging jowl was even less attractive. She opened her bag and took out a slip of paper.

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"This is a cashier's check," she said, "on the Knickerbocker Trust Company for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, made out to me. I'll endorse it. Or I won't."

"That will of course depend. Mrs. Talbot?"

Anne Talbot's lips parted but no sound came. She tried again and got it out. "I have a certified check for sixty-five thousand dollars and forty thousand dollars in cash. I'll pay the rest as soon as I can—I think I can pay it in a month, but it might take longer. Of course you'll want me to sign something, a note, whatever you say. I tried—" She had to swallow. "I tried—" Another swallow. "I did the best I could."

"Mr. Perdis?"

"I have a certified check for my share."

"The full amount?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Khoury?"

"I have nothing."

"Indeed. Then why are you here?"

"I want to know what's in the box. If there's anything worth a quarter of a million to me, I'll buy it."

"The deadline is midnight." Wolfe glanced at the clock. "You have ninety minutes."

"I don't think so. I don't think Mrs. Hazen knows about this. I think you're putting the screws on us without her knowledge. Whatever you're doing, I want to know what's in the box."

"Well." Wolfe's eyes left him to take in the others. "This situation was not covered by the terms of my proposal. Two of you are prepared to comply with the terms and should not suffer for Mr. Khoury's dissent. As for you, Mrs. Talbot, I am willing to accept your declaration of good faith, that you have done your best. You will of course commit yourself in writing to pay the balance. As for you, Mr. Khoury—if you are willful, so am I. Whatever the box contains that relates to you will be turned over to the police at midnight. Archie, get the box and the key." Back to them: "We have procured a key that will serve."

Thinking it desirable to keep up appearances, I first got a Marley from the drawer and loaded it. Then to the cabinet for the key, and then to the safe. As I worked the combination my back was to them, but as I opened the door and took out the box I had an eye on them, not only for appearances. It was conceivable that Perdis or Khoury, or both, had come with the idea of getting something for nothing if a chance offered.

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All four of them had twisted around in their chairs to follow me, and they twisted back as I circled around to Wolfe's desk. As I was putting the box down, the phone rang. It would. I was going to tell Wolfe to take it, but didn't have to.

He lifted the receiver. "Yes?. . .Yes, Saul. . .indeed. That isn't necessary. . . Satisfactory. . .No, stay there, Archie is here. . .How sure are you?. . .Very satisfactory. . .No, call again in an hour or so."

As he hung up there was a gleam in his eye. "Open it;" he said. I inserted the key, fiddled with it a little, got it, lifted the lid all the way, stared a second for effect, and said, "It's empty," and when Perdis bounced up, my hand jerked up with the gun, not having been told that part of the performance was over. I slipped the gun in my pocket and turned the box on its edge so that all could see the shiny inside.

Perdis blurted at Wolfe, "Damn you! You've got it! You had a key!"

Mrs. Oliver squawked something. Anne Talbot lowered her head and covered her face with her hands.

Khoury stood up, vetoed whatever he had intended, and sat down again. He spoke. "Use your head, Perdis. He didn't even know it was empty. Why would he—"

"You're wrong," Wolfe snapped. "I did know it was empty. I knew it last night when I made my proposal."

They were speechless. Anne Talbot lifted her head. "I made the proposal," Wolfe said, "not out of caprice, to plague you, but for a purpose, and the purpose has been served. You have the gun, Archie? Go and stand at the door. No one is to leave."

I obeyed. Perdis, still on his feet, was in the way, so I detoured around back of the chairs. He was yapping, and Khoury was up again. Of course I hadn't the dimmest idea what was coming next as I shut the door and put my back to it, gun in hand, but apparently Wolfe had.

Ignoring them, Wolfe had lifted the receiver and was dialing. Since he hadn't consulted the book and there were only three phone numbers he bothered to keep in his head, I knew who he must be getting, even before he spoke and asked for Mr. Cramer. In a moment he had him.

"Mr. Cramer? The situation has developed as I expected. How soon can you be here with Mrs. Hazen?. . .No. I will not. I told you more than half an hour ago that I would almost

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certainly call you. . .No. I told you that her presence would be essential. If you come without her you won't be admitted. . . Yes. I am prepared to suggest a substitute. . .Yes. . .Yes!"

Mrs. Oliver was on her feet too; they all were, except for Anne Talbot, and as Wolfe hung up Perdis said through his teeth, "Damn you, you gave it to the police!"

"No," Wolfe said. "Are you a dunce? Would I contrive such a hocus-pocus just to pass the time? Confound it, sit down! I have something to say that you would prefer to hear before Mr. Cramer arrives."

"I'm leaving," Mrs. Oliver said. "This was all a trick and you'll regret it. I'm going."

"No one is going. Mr. Goodwin wouldn't shoot you, but he wouldn't have to. Sit down."

Khoury, with his chair right back of his knees, merely had to bend them. Perdis, going to his chair, jostled Mrs. Oliver and didn't apologize. She turned to face me at the door, decided Wolfe was right that I wouldn't have to shoot, and sat.

"You heard me on the phone," Wolfe told them. "Mr. Cramer will be here shortly, and Mrs. Hazen will be with him. The nature of your peculiar relations with Mr. Hazen will have to be divulged to him, that can't be helped, but he doesn't have to know of your invasion of that house yesterday evening. It's only fair—don't interrupt me, there isn't much time—"

Perdis insisted. "You have no evidence of our relations with Hazen."

"Pfui. Your bid to Mr. Goodwin? It's only fair that three of you should know about the box. All that I told you about it last evening was true—Mr. Hazen showing it to his wife and telling her that if he died she should get it and burn the contents, and Mr. Goodwin getting it from beneath the drawer after sending you from the room. Asked by Mr. Perdis if I had opened it, I said no. But Mr. Goodwin had, and it was empty."

"I don't believe it," Mrs. Oliver said. "It's a trick."

Wolfe nodded. "I concocted a trick, that's true, but it's a fact that the box was empty. That's what you have a right to know, three of you. It's an understatement to say that you would like to know where the former contents are, but I have no idea and neither has Mr. Goodwin, and I'm sure Mrs. Hazen hasn't. The obvious conjecture is that Mr. Hazen transferred them to some other place which he preferred. If I could offer—"

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"She has them," Mrs. Oliver said harshly, "Lucy Hazen. I suppose you don't know it or you wouldn't have had us come ready to pay. She took them after she killed him and now we'll have her. She'll be in prison but we'll have her the rest of our lives."

"I don't believe it," Anne Talbot said. She hadn't spoken since the box had been opened. "Lucy wouldn't do that. But this is even worse than it was. . .Now we don't know. . . and I tried so hard. . ."

"I don't believe the box was empty," Khoury told Wolfe. "I think you're lying."

"I don't," Perdis said. "Why would he? There's six hundred and five thousand dollars here ready for him." His eyes went to Wolfe. "But this Cramer—that's Inspector Cramer? You said he has to know about what you call our peculiar relations with Hazen. Why does he?"

The doorbell rang. I was on post and could have let Fritz take it, but they were all in their chairs, so I opened the door to the hall and stepped through. I expected to see Cramer alone, since there hadn't been time for him to get Lucy from the jug, but she was there with him on the stoop, and at her elbow was Sergeant Purley Stebbins. He must have had her brought to 20th Street when Wolfe made his first phone call.

And as I dropped the gun in my pocket and moved, the door to the front room opened and Theodore Weed darted out and to the front door. He couldn't possibly have heard through the soundproofed wall and door, so either he had been looking out of a window or his feeling for her included some kind of a personal electronic receiver.

Seeing no reason to spoil his fun, I let him open the door. Cramer shot him a glance as he entered. Lucy crossed the threshold, saw him, and stopped. She stared, and he stared back. He lifted a hand and let it drop. Stebbins, back of her, growled, "On in, Mrs. Hazen."

She looked at me, and back at Weed, and I said, "Everything's under control, Mrs. Hazen," and Weed backed up a step. I thought, and still think, that he had intended to warn her that Wolfe and I were a pair of Judases, but the mere sight of her paralyzed him.

Weed stood and stared while Cramer and Stebbins got their coats off and I took hers and put it on a hanger. When we headed for the office he followed us, and there was no point in herding him back to the front room. Either Wolfe had the cards or he hadn't.

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Three steps in, Cramer stopped to send his eyes around. I didn't envy him any. The four people there weren't a bunch of bums, anything but; they had position and connections and lawyers if necessary, and much wampum. And here he was, in the office of a private detective, with a woman charged with murder.

Of course he had a good reason: he suspected he might have stubbed his toe. I hadn't been present when Wolfe had made his previous phone call, but presumably he had said that he expected soon to be ready to offer a substitute for Mrs. Hazen, and Cramer knew Wolfe only too well.

But naturally he didn't care to give that reason to that audience. He faced them. "I'm here because Wolfe told me that you four people would be here and I wanted to know what he had to say to you. I brought Mrs. Hazen because from something Wolfe said I got the idea that it would be in the interest of justice for her to be here. I want to make it plain that as an officer of the law I don't rely on any private detective to do my job for me, and what's more no private detective is going to interfere."

He went to the red leather chair and sat. Stebbins took Lucy to the extra chair, next to Perdis, and stood behind her. That way they had their murderer surrounded, with Cramer in front of her only three paces off. Weed went to a chair over by the big globe. As I circled around to get to my desk Wolfe spoke.

"Mr. Stebbins. Mrs. Hazen is your prisoner, and of course it's your duty to guard her. But I doubt if she intends any outbreak. If you wish to stand by the murderer of Mr. Hazen I suggest that you move to Mr. Khoury."

Silence. Not a sound. For the record, for how people react, four of them—Cramer, Lucy, Mrs. Oliver, and Anne Talbot—kept their eyes at Wolfe. Perdis and Sergeant Stebbins moved theirs to Khoury. Weed, over by the globe, got up, took a step, and stopped.

Khoury's head tilted back, slowly, until his eyes were focused on Wolfe past the tip of his long thin nose. "That's my name," he said. "I'm the only Khoury here."

"You are indeed." Wolfe's head turned. "Mr. Cramer. As I said, I am prepared to offer a substitute for your consideration, but that's all. Not only have I no conclusive evidence, I have none at all. I have only some suggestive facts. First, Mr. Hazen was a blackmailer. He

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extorted large sums, not only from these four people, but also from others, using his public-relations business as a cover. He had in his possession—"

"You can't prove that," Mrs. Oliver blurted.

"But I can," he told her. "Item, you have in your bag a check for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. For what? Account for it. I advise you, madam, to hold your tongue. I would prefer to tell Mr. Cramer only what I must to support my suggestion, and I'll go beyond that only if you force me to. You shouldn't have challenged me. Now that you have, I put it to you, were the amounts that you paid Mr. Hazen ostensibly for professional services, actually paid under coercion?"

She looked down at the bag in her lap, looked up again, and said, "Yes."

"Then don't interrupt me." Wolfe returned to Cramer. "Mr. Hazen had in his possession various objects, I don't know what, to substantiate his demands. Last evening I told these four people that I had secured those objects and that I would surrender them for one million dollars, giving them twenty-four hours to meet my terms. They are here. Three of them—"

"The objects are here?" Cramer demanded.

"No. I don't know where they are. I have never seen them. The people are here. This will go better if you keep your questions until I'm through. Three of them—Mrs. Oliver, Mrs. Talbot, and Mr. Perdis—came prepared to pay, and that was what I was after. I was acting on the premise, certainly worth a test, that one of Hazen's victims had killed him, and to kill him would have been futile unless he got the object or objects that had made it possible for Hazen to bleed him.

"For a moment I abandon fact for surmise. Mr. Khoury did get the object or objects. By some ruse, probably with the promise of a large sum of money as a lure, he induced Hazen to get his car from the garage Monday night and drive somewhere, and to have with him the object or objects. That surmise is not haphazard. The others came here this evening prepared to pay, but not Mr. Khoury. He knew I had nothing to support my threat. Even when I told him that the objects pertaining to him would be given to the police in ninety minutes he was unmoved."

"Get back to facts," Cramer growled. His head turned. "Mr. Khoury, do you want to comment?"

"No." From Khoury's smile

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you might have thought he was enjoying it. "This is fascinating. I thought I had decided not to bring my share of the million because I didn't believe he had anything that threatened anybody."

Wolfe, ignoring him, stayed at Cramer. "For a fact I submit the conversation at the gathering Monday evening after Mrs. Hazen and Mr. Weed had left. Of course you and your staff have it in detail, but you didn't know that Hazen was a blackmailer and that he not only bled his prey, he was pleased to torment them. In that conversation he introduced topics that obviously referred to the pinch he had them in—for instance, poison.

"I don't know which of those present that touched, and am not concerned. But one of his topics pointed clearly at Mr. Khoury. He remarked that his wife's father had been a great inventor, a genius; and his wife's father, Titus Postel, had been associated with Mr. Khoury. So it seemed likely that his hold on Mr. Khoury was in some way connected with Titus Postel, but at the time I learned that, yesterday evening, I had no reason to single out Mr. Khoury for special attention, so I merely noted it for possible future application."

Wolfe took a breath. "But two incidents today did single out Mr. Khoury. Shortly after one o'clock you phoned me to say that the gun I had given you had been the property of Titus Postel and that he had committed suicide with it five years ago; and soon after that, on the telephone with Mr. Khoury, he informed me that he would be present this evening but that he was declining my proposal. He didn't put it in those terms, but that was the gist."

Khoury made a noise, a subdued snort. Cramer said. "Yes, Mr. Khoury?"

"Nothing," Khoury said.

Wolfe resumed. "Now the guns. Call them Gun H, Mr. Hazen's, the one he was shot with, left in his car; and Gun P, Mr. Postel's, which I gave you this morning. My account of them is not established fact, but it is more than mere surmise because it is based on a high degree of probability. When Mr. Khoury went to that grotesque dinner party Monday evening he had Gun P with him. During the —"

"You can prove he had it?"

"Certainly not, I'm telling you what happened, not what I can prove. During the evening he found or made an opportunity to go to Mr. Hazen's bedroom, took Gun H from the

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drawer, and put Gun P in its place. With a double purpose: first, and minor, so that Hazen would find a gun there—they were the same make—if he looked for it. Second, and major, to implicate Mrs. Hazen. He intended to leave Gun H in the car after he killed Hazen.

"The police would of course learn that it had been Hazen's, kept in that drawer in his room, and when they found Gun P there in its place, the gun that had belonged to Mrs. Hazen's father, they would naturally assume that she had put it there in a witless effort to mislead them. By the way." His head turned. "Mrs. Hazen. The gun that had belonged to your father—was it in your possession?"

Lucy's lips formed a "No," but there was almost no sound where I sat, five steps away.

"When did you see it last?"

She shook her head. "I don't understand." I could hear her now. "When they told me the gun I brought you was the one my father shot himself with I thought they were lying. I don't understand."

"No wonder. Neither do the police. Did you ever have that gun—your father's?"

"I had it for a while. They gave it to me after. . .after he died. I kept it with some of his things. But it disappeared."

"How long after his death did it disappear?"

"I don't know. It was about two years after that I noticed it was gone."

"Had you any idea who took it?"

"I didn't know, but I thought perhaps Mrs. Khoury had. I didn't ask her. She thought I shouldn't keep it because it only reminded me. . ." She let it hang. "Is it true that my husband was a blackmailer?"

"Yes. And your former employer is not only a murderer, he tried to make you his scapegoat. You have been unfortunate in your choice of male associates, but I can relieve your mind about one you didn't choose, your father. He didn't commit suicide; he was murdered. By Mr. Khoury."

"No," Khoury said. "Another one? You're piling it on."

Wolfe leveled his eyes at him. "Your aplomb is admirable, sir," he said, no sarcasm. "Of course you're counting on what I said at the beginning, that I have no evidence. You're too sanguine. The evidence almost certainly exists, but to get it will require authority and a large trained staff, and I have neither. I am obliged to Mr. Hazen for a valuable hint, his remark that

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Mrs. Hazen's father was a great inventor and a genius. That *suggests that you might have* cheated him out of the proceeds of his genius, and immediately after talking with you on the phone today I put a man on it."

Wolfe turned to Cramer. "The man was Saul Panzer. You know his capacities. He phoned me about an hour ago, just before I called you, and what he reported was the basis for my statement to Mrs. Hazen, that Khoury killed her father. I don't tell you what he reported because you will get it from him, and also because I don't want Mr. Khoury to know what has been uncovered, and neither do you.

"As I said, I am only offering a suggestion, but I trust it is cogent enough to persuade you to restrict Mr. Khoury's movements, and to put some men to work. He may have taken Hazen's keys on the chance that they might be useful, and he may still have them, though not on his person. Find them. Ransack his premises. He may even still have the object or objects he certainly took; find them. If you see his wife before he is allowed to communicate with her you may learn something about Gun P." He flipped a hand. "But this is superfluous; you know your job. If I—"

Khoury had moved. No rush, *he wasn't a bit disturbed, but* he was on his feet. "Really," he said, "there's a limit." His straight line to the door was in front of Mrs. Oliver and Perdis and Lucy, but it would have been bad manners to cross their bows, so he started around. On past Mrs. Oliver, and Perdis, and Lucy, with Stebbins at her shoulder, before Cramer spoke. "Stop him, Purley." Khoury whirled, saying through his teeth, "Don't touch me."

"Nuts," Purley said, and began going over him for a gun. Gun N, maybe. Anyway, Khoury couldn't have made it to the hall because Theodore Weed was there filling the door.

I'll have to leave it with two loose ends.

First, the object or objects pertaining to Anne Talbot, Mrs. Oliver, Perdis, and presumably other assorted Hazen clients. They have never turned up. At least, the cops never found *them. If one of the clients did*, he didn't announce it. So if the hints Hazen scattered around at the dinner party aroused your curiosity, I can't satisfy it.

Second, the fee that Wolfe had certainly earned. Lucy refused to take any of Hazen's leavings; she wouldn't even take the house. That was noble, and

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even decent, considering how he had got it, but private detectives have to eat. Unquestionably Nero Wolfe has to eat. There's a chance that she'll get a chunk of Khoury's pile eventually, on account of the evidence Cramer dug up that Khoury had stolen a couple of Titus Postel's inventions; but Khoury, who is now in the death house while his lawyers hop around from court to court, has admitted nothing, and neither has his wife. So if you're curious as to how much Wolfe collected for his thirty-six hours' work I can't satisfy you on that either.

As for a third point you might be curious about, whether Lucy and Theodore Weed have found out how they feel about each other, you may have one guess. If you need more than one, what do you suppose makes the world go around?

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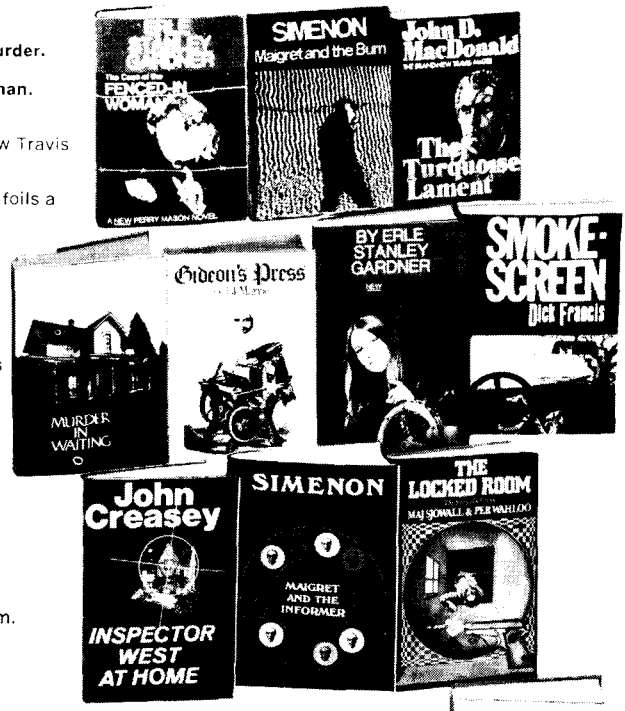
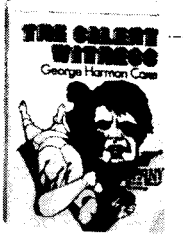

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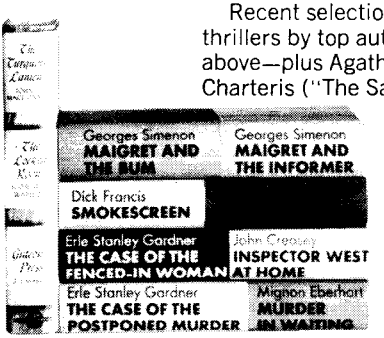

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